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**Journalists trying to help readers cope
may mislead on holiday-suicide myth**

In some publications, holiday-suicide myth persists

PHILADELPHIA – During the holidays, many in the press write stories aiming to help readers cope with the blues and other seasonal conditions. But some journalists inadvertently support a myth about the holidays and suicide, or quote well-intentioned sources who should know better.

Despite the fact that the holiday season has some of the lowest average daily suicide rates, some journalists continue to perpetuate the holiday-suicide myth.

In the 2017-18 holiday season, two-thirds of the print news and feature stories that mentioned both the holidays and suicide drew a false connection between them, according to the latest analysis by the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania. The analysis was based on stories in the Nexis database and excluded coincidental references.

The result was unchanged from the prior holiday season. Of the 31 stories examined, 65 percent supported the holiday-suicide myth, while 35 percent debunked it. An additional 32 stories made coincidental reference to holidays and suicide and were excluded. (See figure 1.)

“Although many of the stories supporting the myth were published in rural areas, we hope that greater awareness of actual suicide risk will help residents of those regions to better cope with whatever stresses they might experience during the holiday period,” said Dan Romer, research director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center (APPC).

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the holiday months have some of the lowest suicide rates. CDC data from 2016, the most recent available, show that November, December, and January were the lowest months in average suicide deaths per day (11th, 12th, and 10th, respectively). The highest average daily rates are typically in the spring and summer. In 2016, the months with the highest average daily suicide rates were August and July (1st and 2nd, respectively). (See figure 2 and table 1.)

Perpetuating the holiday-suicide myth

APPC has analyzed news coverage of the holiday-suicide myth since 1999 and in most of those years, more newspapers have upheld the myth than debunked it. In only two of those years did more than 60 percent of the news stories that were tracked debunk the myth.

A number of the stories that perpetuated the myth this year were published in local newspapers. Among them:

- A columnist for The Advertiser-Glean in Guntersville, Ala., wrote: “At Christmas, we certainly have all the accoutrements of having a glowing feeling. There is beautiful music, sparkling array of lights in every direction, excitement of family together ... so many things that affect our moods. So, why are there so many suicides during the Christmas holiday?” (Dec. 20, 2017)
- A Wilmington, Del., News Journal story about people struggling with addiction quoted the CEO of a counseling service as saying: “For some, you see an increase in suicide and depression around the holidays because the holidays can be such a difficult time for so many people, especially when the world is inundating you with cheer.” (Dec. 23, 2017)
- A columnist for the Hutchinson Leader in Minnesota wrote: “It has long been observed that the rate of suicides and interfamilial violence goes up during times of traditional family gatherings.” (Dec. 27, 2017)
- A reporter for the Wyoming County Press Examiner, in Pennsylvania, wrote: “Holiday blues is a common problem this time of year, with hospitals and police departments reporting high incidents of suicides and attempting suicides, Luongo [a college counselor] said.” (Dec. 6, 2017)

Giving people the sense that suicide is more likely over the holidays may have adverse consequences, Romer said. For vulnerable individuals who are already contemplating suicide, such news can have contagious effects. This is why the national recommendations for suicide reporting by the news media advise journalists not to promote information that can increase contagion, such as reports of epidemics or seasonal increases, especially when there is no basis in fact.

Getting it right

Other publications large and small debunked the myth, sometimes while acknowledging the fraught nature of the holiday season:

- In a story on “supporting the struggling” at holiday time, the Gaylord Herald Times, of Michigan, said: “According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, it is a longstanding myth that suicides occur more frequently during the holiday season. The CDC’s National Center for Health Statistics has reported that the suicide rate is at its lowest in December, with peaks in the spring and the fall.” (Dec. 28, 2017)
- Just after New Year’s Day, in the Riverton Ranger (Wyoming), columnist Randy Tucker wrote about post-holiday melancholy: “It is often a very persistent experience following the holidays, a time when holiday cheer often leads to feelings of isolation. Combined with the depression familiar during the winter months, common knowledge claims suicide rates are highest during the dark days of the New Year – but the opposite is true.”

Journalists helping to dispel the holiday-suicide myth can provide resources for readers who are in or know of someone who is in a potential crisis. The CDC (<http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/suicide/holiday.html>), the Suicide Prevention Resource Center (www.sprc.org) and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (<http://www.samhsa.gov/prevention/suicide.aspx>) offer valuable information. The U.S. National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is 800-273-TALK (8255).

Recommendations developed by journalism and suicide-prevention groups with the Annenberg Public Policy Center (<http://www.reportingonsuicide.org>) note that reporters should consult reliable sources on suicide rates, such as those produced by the CDC, and provide information about resources that can be helpful to people in need.

Methodology

News and feature stories linking suicide with the holidays were identified through the Nexis database, with “suicide” and “Thanksgiving/Christmas/New Years” or “holidays” as search terms from November 15, 2017, through January 31, 2018. Researchers determined whether the stories supported the link, debunked it, or showed a coincidental link. Only domestic suicides were counted; overseas suicide bombings, for example, were excluded. Thanks go to Ilana Weitz, who collected and supervised the coding of the stories; Sebastián Lemus Camacho and Olivia Bridges for assistance in coding; and Emily Maroni for assistance in charting the data. Thanks also go to Alex Crosby and colleagues at the CDC for providing monthly rates of suicide in the United States.

The [Annenberg Public Policy Center](#) was established in 1993 to educate the public and policy makers about the media’s role in advancing public understanding of political, science, and adolescent health issues at the local, state and federal levels. Follow APPC on Twitter ([@APPCPenn](#)) and on Facebook (www.facebook.com/appc.org)

Figure 1. Percentage of stories supporting the myth vs. those debunking it. Excludes stories citing both in a coincidental manner (no causal association).

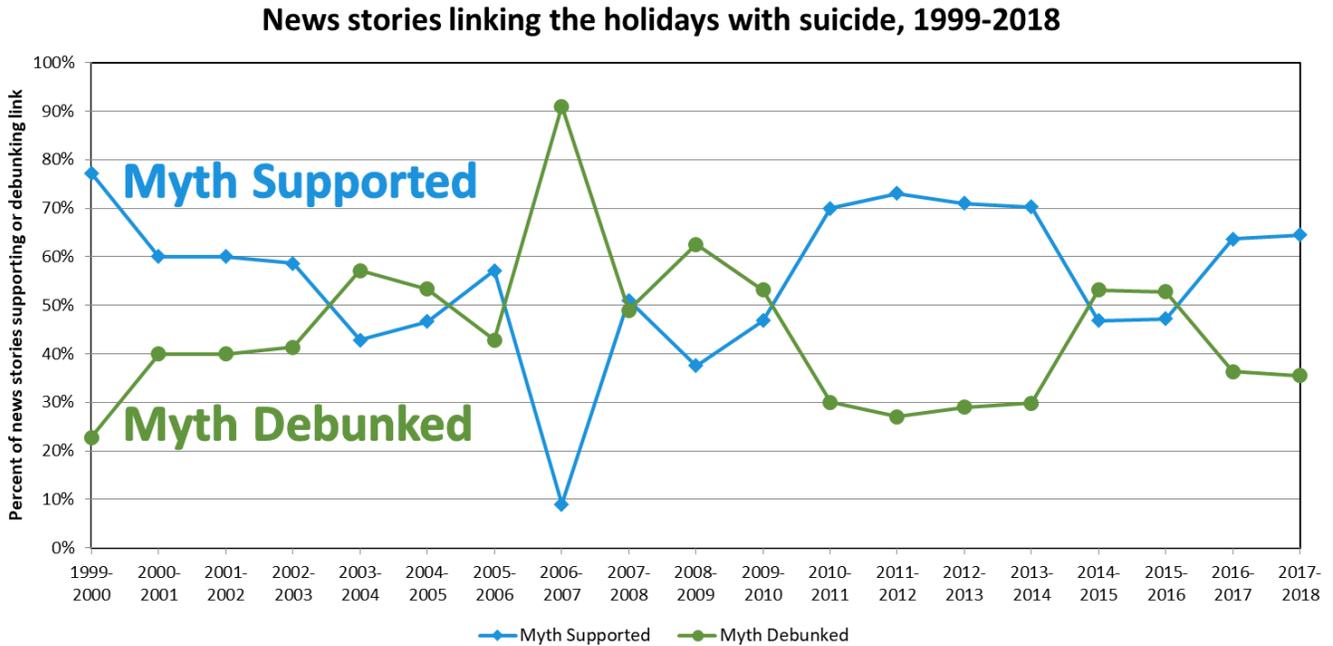


Figure 2. Average number of suicides per day in each month from January 1999 to December 2016. Data from November, December and January are shaded. Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Health Statistics.

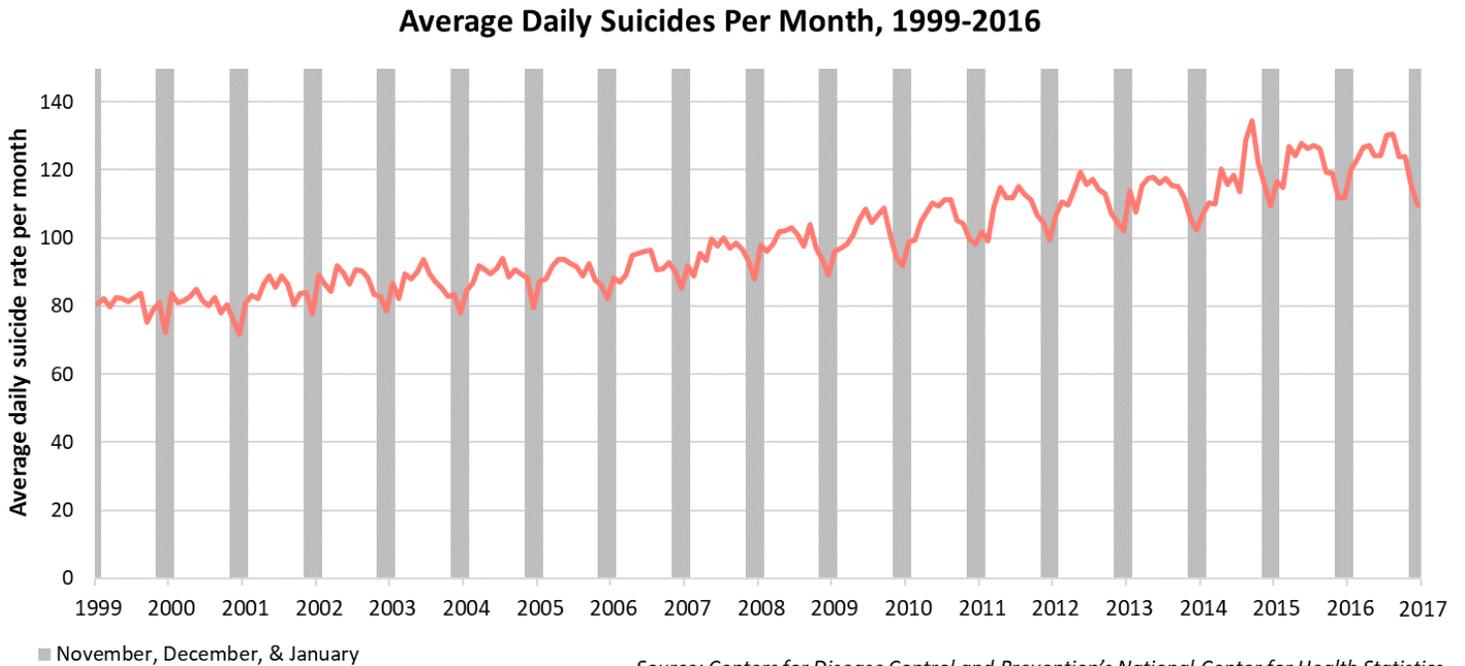


Table 1. Average number of suicides per day in each month in 2016. Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Health Statistics.

Average Daily Suicides per Month, 2016

Month	Average # of suicide deaths per day	2016 rank
January	120.00	10
February	123.04	9
March	126.48	4
April	127.07	3
May	124.29	5
June	124.20	6
July	130.10	2
August	130.39	1
September	124.00	7
October	123.81	8
November	115.27	11
December	109.58	12
2016 Average	123.18	

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Health Statistics.