

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

DATE: December 4, 2012

CONTACT: Dan Romer, 215-898-6776 (office); 610-202-7315 (cell)

As the national adult suicide rate increases, news stories about suicides during the holidays grow in number

A common misperception about the end of year holidays is that more people commit suicide during this period than at other times in the year. Since 2000, the Annenberg Public Policy Center has been tracking press reporting about this widespread belief. In the millennium year of 1999, APPC identified over 60 stories that ran during that holiday period saying that suicides do indeed spike over the holidays. These stories accounted for 77% of the stories that talked about suicide potentially being related to the holidays.

After we noted that misconception, the number of such stories dropped and stories debunking the myth grew in number. However, our latest examination of stories that ran during the last holiday season (2011-12) shows that the number is once again rising. Indeed, as seen in Figure 1 below, the proportion of stories making the link is once again at the same high level as in 1999 (76%).

We have also tracked actual daily suicide rates to determine if they are higher during the holiday season. As seen in Figure 2 below, based on official suicide deaths in the U.S., the months of November, December, and January typically have the lowest daily rates of suicide in the year. Despite what many believe, the holiday-suicide link is truly a myth.

“The return of the holiday-suicide connection may be related to the fact that the adult (ages 25+) suicide rate has increased in recent years in step with the great recession,” noted APPC’s Dan Romer, who has directed the study since its inception. “With more people affected by suicide, news stories about suicide may be more common over the holidays, bringing the myth back to our attention.”

The phenomenon of the “holiday blues” may also play a role in making the myth credible. And of course, favorite holiday stories, such as portrayed in the film *It’s a Wonderful Life*, suggest that the holidays can be a time of great stress with thoughts of suicide.

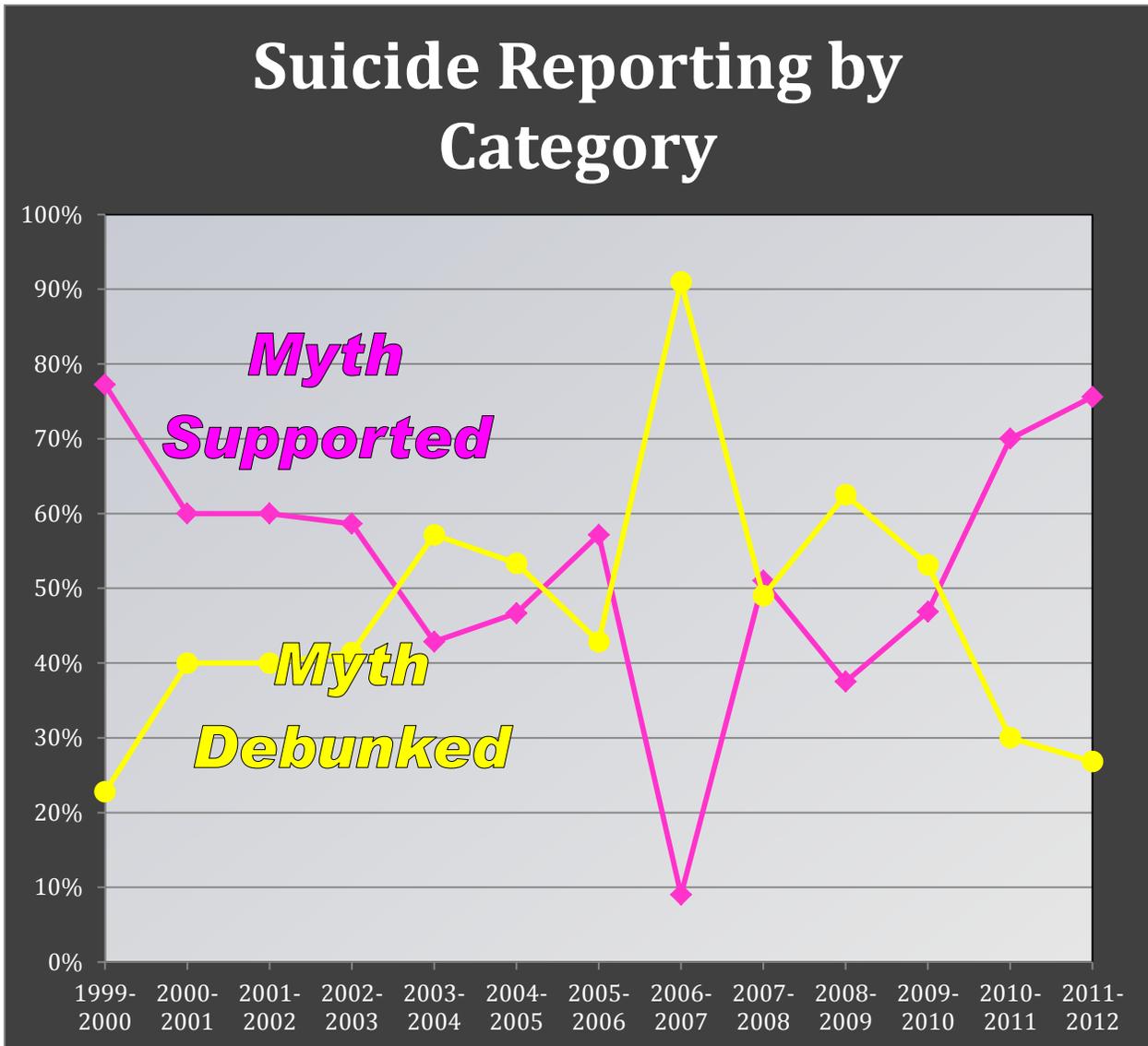
There is clearly a seasonal pattern to suicide rates. As shown in Figure 2, the spring and summer are usually the highest months in the year. So, it is difficult to understand how the holiday-suicide myth came about.

The problem with making the myth credible is that media content that makes suicide appear more common can encourage vulnerable individuals to consider it. Although we have no direct evidence for such an effect of the holiday myth, other evidence indicates that the media can influence vulnerable people to attempt suicide. This has led various public health agencies and organizations to encourage more accurate reporting about suicide by the news media (see www.reportingonsuicide.org).

A website dedicated to promoting knowledge about suicide prevention, www.sprc.org, provides helpful information about suicide. CDC also provides its viewpoint about the holiday suicide myth at <http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/suicide/holiday.html>. Finally, the Surgeon General has released a new strategy for the prevention of suicide (see <http://www.samhsa.gov/prevention/suicide.aspx>) that encourages more accurate reporting about the causes of suicide.

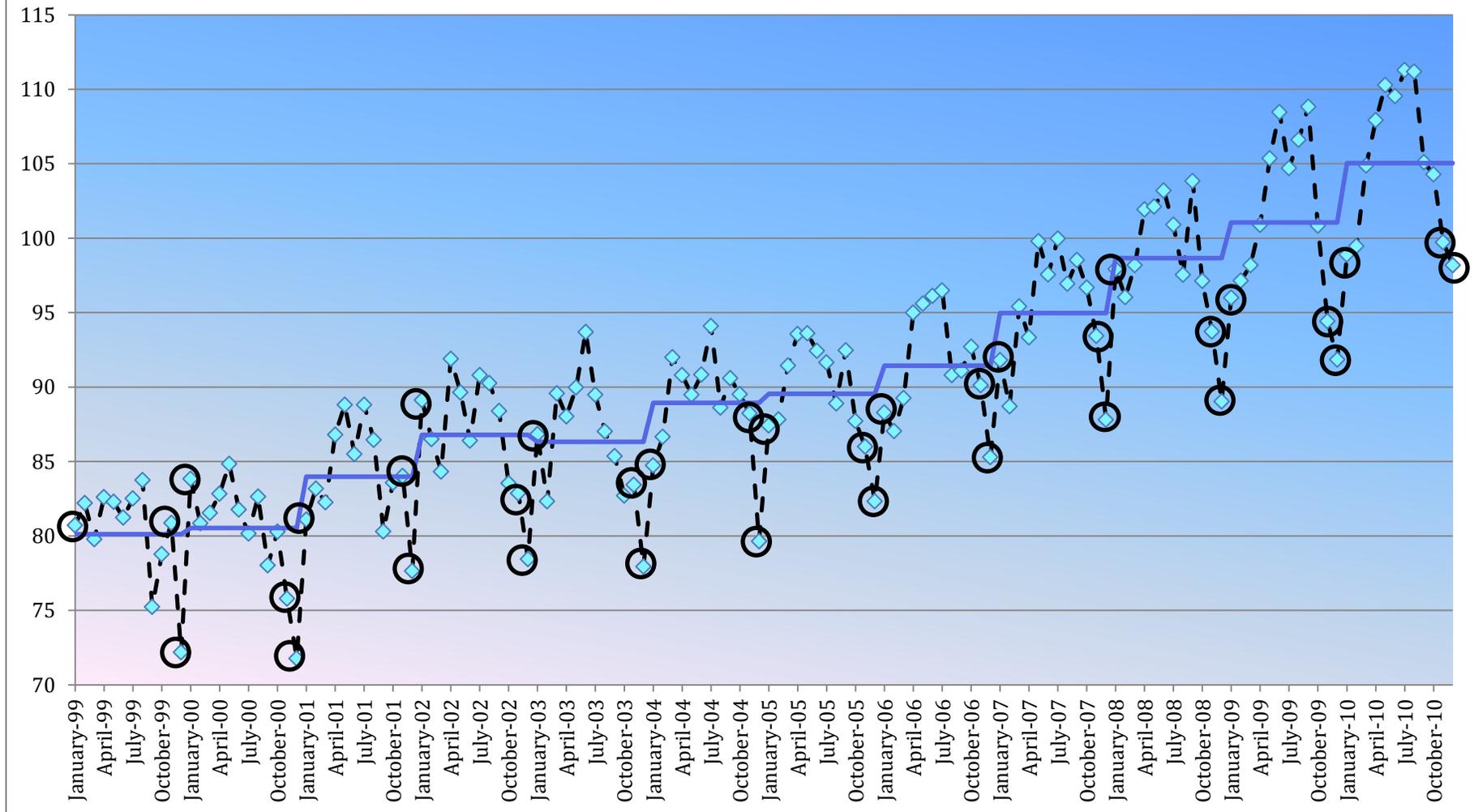
According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the U.S. For persons between the ages of 15-24, it is the second leading cause of death, and for persons between the ages of 25-44, it is the fourth leading cause. It is now a greater cause of death than traffic fatalities.

Figure 1. Percentage of stories that supported the myth vs. those that debunked it.



Note: Stories were coded into three categories: Those in which the myth was supported, those in which the myth was clearly debunked, and stories in which suicide was said to coincide with the holidays but no causal association was suggested (coincidental). Coincidental stories are not included in this figure.

Figure 2. Suicide Average Daily Rate per Month



Note: Circled points represent daily rates for November, December, and January of each year.

Source: National Center for Health Statistics.

Methodology

Newspaper reports linking suicide with the holidays were identified using the Nexis.com database with “suicide” and “Thanksgiving/Christmas/New Years” or “holidays” as search terms for the last period of November 15, 2011 to January 31, 2012. Coders independently evaluated the stories for content either supporting the link, simply noting that a suicide occurred on or near a holiday (coincidental link), or actually debunking the myth. Only stories about domestic suicide were coded (e.g., suicide bombings in other countries were not included). Thanks go to Ilana Weitz who collected and supervised the coding of the data.

The **Annenberg Public Policy Center** (<http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/>) was established in 1994 to educate the public and policy makers about the media’s role in advancing public understanding of political and health issues at the local, state and federal levels. The Adolescent Communication Institute was established in 2002 to focus on strategies that promote the mental and behavioral health of adolescents.