

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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In Turnaround, More News Media Debunked Holiday-Suicide Myth Last Year

PHILADELPHIA – After a four-year run in which a majority of news stories falsely linked the holiday season with an increase in suicide, more stories last year debunked the holiday-suicide myth than supported it, according to an analysis by the Annenberg Public Policy Center.

In reality, suicides tend to occur at the lowest rate during the holiday period from mid-November through January, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). But for years, many news and feature stories have endorsed the erroneous idea that suicide is more common around the holidays.

The new analysis of news stories that connected the holidays with suicide found a decline in the persistence of that myth. Less than half of the stories (47 percent) in the 2014-2015 holiday season perpetuated that falsehood, down from 70 percent in the 2013-2014 season. The stories were gathered from the Nexis database.

“This is the first time in five years that a majority of news stories debunked the myth,” said Daniel Romer, research director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center (APPC) of the University of Pennsylvania. “It’s encouraging to see a turnaround from the prior years, when nearly three-quarters of the news stories upheld the false connection between the holidays and suicide.”

Despite the decline, the myth continues to appear in the news. There were 22 stories that supported the myth versus 25 stories debunking it in U.S. newspapers from mid-November 2014 through January 2015.

Lowest daily suicide rates in 2013 were in November and December

The months of November and December typically have the lowest rate of daily suicides, with January sometimes reaching the annual average, according to statistics through 2013, the most recent year available from the CDC’s National Center for Health Statistics (see Figure 2 below). The most daily U.S. suicides usually occur between April and August.

In 2013, for example, the lowest daily suicide rates were for the months of November and December. The highest daily rates were in April and May.

The policy center has been tracking press reports about suicide and the holidays since the 1999-2000 holiday season, when 77 percent of the stories supported the myth (see Figure 1 below). From 2003 to 2009, the percentage of stories debunking the myth was usually higher than or

equal to those perpetuating the myth. Since then, stories upholding the myth have again predominated press coverage.

“Although many of the stories perpetuating the myth may have a benevolent intent, we’re concerned that making it appear that suicide is more likely over the holidays may inadvertently encourage those who are already considering it to go ahead with a plan,” Romer said. “Suicide reporting recommendations encourage news outlets to provide information that helps those in need of support to find it.” Those recommendations on media coverage of suicide can be found at www.reportingonsuicide.org.

Examples of the false link between suicide and the holidays include:

- One Utah newspaper wrote in November 2014: “Yet, this time of year can be devastating for a lot of people. It increases the depth of loneliness for those who have few family or friends. Suicide rates actually rise as the Christmas season approaches and memories of lost loved ones are more vivid and we miss them more than ever.”
- An Illinois newspaper wrote in December 2014: “The holiday season, Burse said, is a time when suicides tend to increase because people do not connect with others and they get lonely.”

Resources on suicide include the Suicide Prevention Resource Center, www.sprc.org, and the Centers for Disease Control at <http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/suicide/holiday.html>. The U.S. Surgeon General’s strategy for the prevention of suicide encourages more accurate reporting on the causes: <http://www.samhsa.gov/prevention/suicide.aspx>. In addition, the U. S. National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is at 800-273-TALK (8255).

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, 2014 through January 31, 2015. Researchers evaluated the stories as supporting the link, debunking it, or showing a coincidental link. Only domestic suicides were counted; overseas suicide bombings, for instance, were not counted. Thanks go to Ilana Weitz, who collected and supervised the coding of the data, and to Jazmyne Simmons and Anna Rose Bedrosian for assistance in coding data. Thanks also go to Alex Crosby of the CDC for assistance in obtaining monthly rates of suicide.

The **Annenberg Public Policy Center** (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.

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

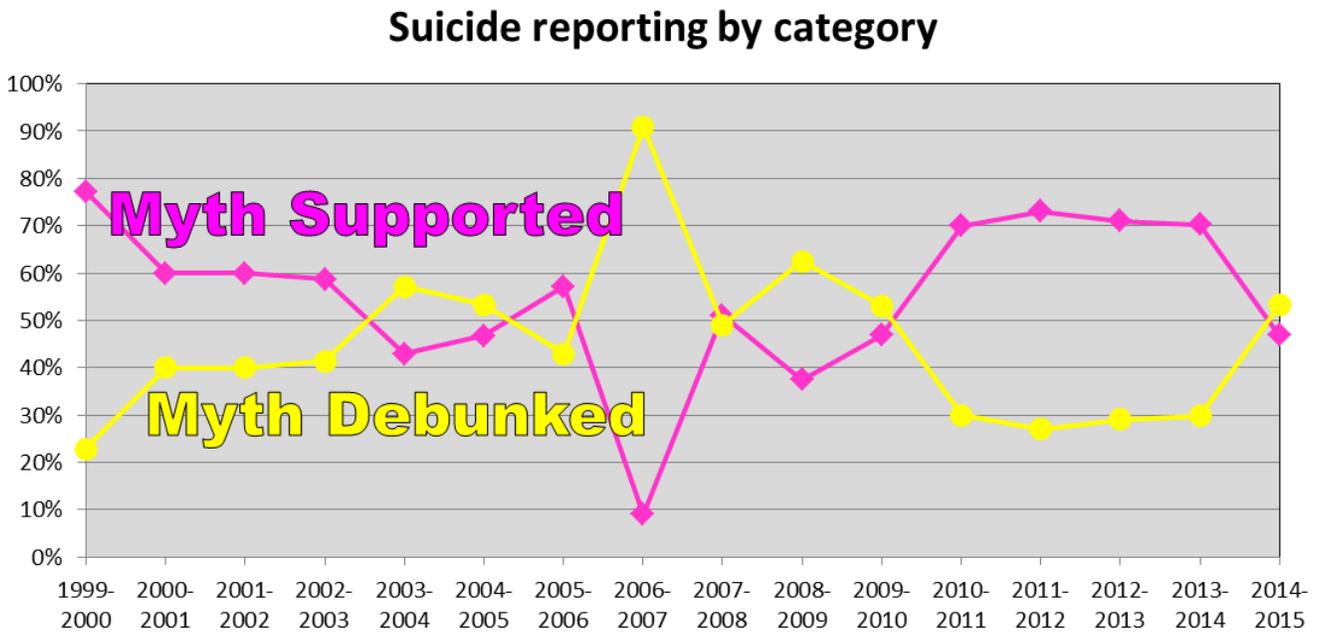
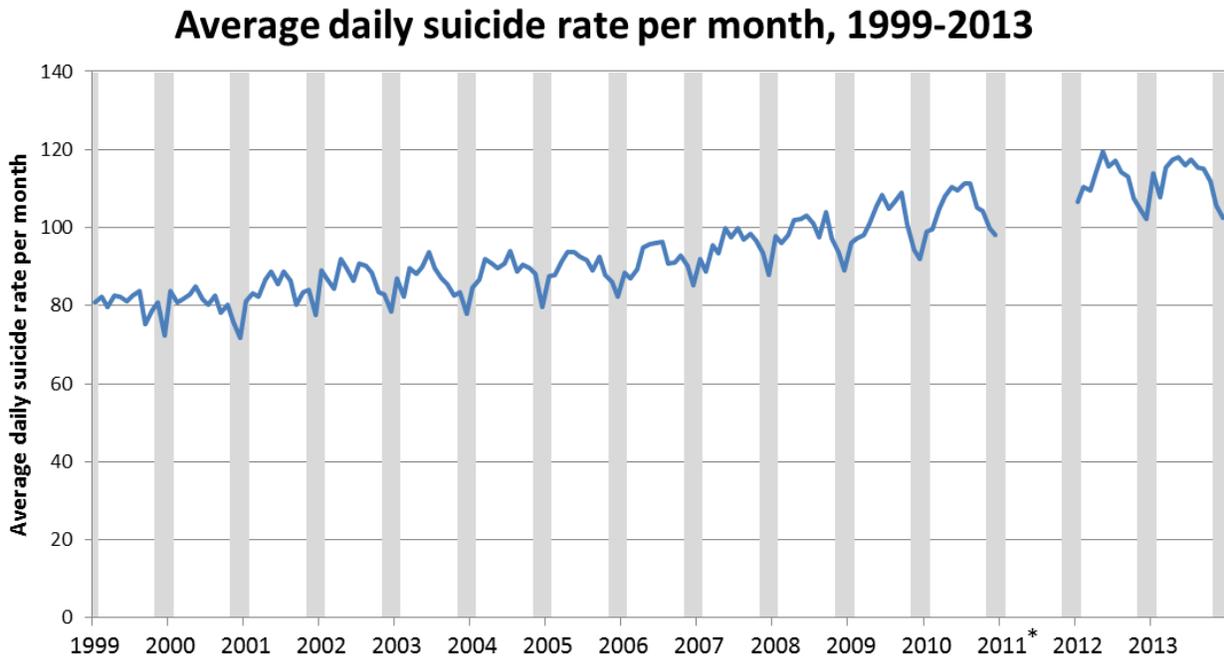


Figure 2. Average number of suicides per day in each month from January 1999 to December 2015. Data from November, December and January are shaded. Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Health Statistics.



Average number of suicides each day per month in the U.S. for 1999-2013. Shading highlights the months of November, December, and January of each year.

*No data for 2011 were available as of publication time.