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CONTACT:

Dr. Dan Romer
215-898-6776
Dr. Herbert Hendin
212-410-1552

Media Continue to Perpetuate Myth of Winter Holiday – Suicide Link

Many newspaper stories about suicides during the 2000 winter holiday season linked end-of-year holidays and suicide, despite the fact that such a link is a myth, according to a new study from the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania. Suicides actually peak in the Spring and are not more common during the winter holiday period.

“While it might make the story more interesting to make a connection between Thanksgiving, Christmas or New Years and a suicide, the fact of the matter is that reporters who make that connection are making a link that just doesn’t exist,” said Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Dean of the Annenberg School for Communication and Director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center.

“The myth that suicides increase during the Christmas holidays dies hard,” said Dr. Herbert Hendin, Medical Director of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. “Reporters often sound disappointed when they hear it isn’t true.”

In December of 2000, the Annenberg Public Policy Center released the findings of their analysis of coverage of suicides during the 1999 winter holidays to 100 newspapers across the country. The press release highlighted the fact that the majority of the 64 stories linking suicide with the holidays from November 8, 1999 to January 15, 2000 either implied or directly attributed the cause to the holiday season. The release also pointed out that suicides peak in the spring and not in the winter. The Policy Center hoped by informing reporters that the winter holiday-suicide connection was a myth, coverage of winter suicides would not explicitly make that link in the future. However, when we matched the time of year and excluded stories having to do with the new millennium, the results for the following winter mirrored those of the previous year,:

December 15, 1999 – January 15, 2000	49% of 39 stories directly attributed suicide to the holidays and 36% implied an association
December 15, 2000 (one day after the APPC release) – January 15, 2001	48% of 25 stories directly attributed suicide to the holidays and 44% implied an association

Annenberg researchers offer several reasons why reporters may find the myth appealing and continue to perpetuate it:

- Despite the fact that the majority of persons who commit suicide suffer from a mental disorder such as depression, making the winter holiday-suicide connection gives readers a different and more “sexy” explanation for the occurrence of suicide.

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- The holiday-suicide connection gives reporters the opportunity to interview people whose job is supervising suicide-prevention programs, such as suicide hotlines. This gives readers reassurance that someone is there to take care of potential victims. For example, one January 2000 story reported: “in San Francisco, suicide-prevention services added extra hot line staff in the event that New Year’s hoopla triggered more bouts of depression.”
- There is no strong interest in correcting or challenging the myth. The few sources who can correct it are unlikely to come forward and those at crisis centers may value the heightened attention to suicide prevention it creates.
- The tendency on the part of journalists to cover the same story on an anniversary schedule may also institutionalize the tendency to repeat the story at each holiday.

The researchers also highlight some possible hazards to the tendency on the part of the media to make the winter holiday-suicide link. First, there is evidence that certain types of reporting on suicide create a contagion effect among vulnerable individuals. Second, much of the holiday-suicide reporting makes the erroneous link but then does not offer readers accurate information about ways to recognize and treat suicidal persons.

Earlier this year, the public health community along with the United States Surgeon General, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and the Annenberg Public Policy Center released new recommendations for media coverage of suicide. The recommendations highlight problems in some of the media coverage of suicides:

- Certain ways of describing suicide in the news contribute to what behavioral scientists call “suicide contagion” or “copycat” suicides.
- Research suggests that inadvertently romanticizing suicide or idealizing those who take their own lives by portraying suicide as a heroic or romantic act may encourage others to identify with the victim.
- Exposure to suicide method through media reports can encourage vulnerable individuals to imitate it. Clinicians believe the danger is even greater if there is a detailed description of the method. Research indicates that detailed descriptions or pictures of the location or site of a suicide encourage imitation.
- Presenting suicide as the inexplicable act of an otherwise healthy or high-achieving person may encourage identification with the victim.

The recommendations emphasize the need for reporters to take steps to reduce the contagion or copy-cat effect of some types of media coverage of suicide and provide suggestions on angles to pursue and questions to ask when covering a suicide. The recommendations also urge reporters to highlight opportunities to prevent suicide and inform readers and viewers about the likely causes of suicide, its warning signs, trends in suicide rates, and recent treatment advances. Copies of the recommendations are available on www.appcpenn.org and www.afsp.org.

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The Annenberg Public Policy Center was established by publisher and philanthropist Walter Annenberg in 1994 to create a community of scholars within the University of Pennsylvania that would examine the role of communications in public policy issues at the local, state and federal levels. The Center has four ongoing research foci: Information and Society; Media and the Developing Mind; Media and the Dialogue of Democracy; Health Communications. The Annenberg Public Policy Center supports research and sponsors lectures and conferences in these areas.