

**THE ANNENBERG
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**Holiday-Suicide Link
Newspapers Continue to Perpetuate the Myth**

Despite no basis in fact, newspapers continue to report on the increased risk of suicide around the Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year holidays. An analysis of newspaper reporting over the past seven years released today by the Annenberg Public Policy Center shows that this story represents about half of all holiday-relevant suicide reporting.

Stories linking suicides and the holidays during the 2005-2006 end-of-year season represented about 57 percent of the articles written, a statistically insignificant change from the 2004-2005 holiday period (see Table 1). The rest of the stories debunked the myth.

As noted in previous studies, the rate of suicide in the U.S. is lowest in December, and peaks in the spring and fall. Data collected by the National Center for Health Statistics (see Figure 1 below) show that this pattern has not changed through 2003, the most recent year for which national data are available.

The Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania has been tracking holiday suicide reporting since 2000 when it released its first press alert on newspaper coverage of the myth.

The percentage of stories debunking the holiday-suicide myth has more than doubled since the Center began its survey. In the 1999-2000 holiday period,

only about 23 percent of the stories that made a link between the holidays and suicide debunked the myth. In the 2004-05 holiday period, about 43 percent of the stories noted that the association is untrue. Nevertheless, the rate of reporting the myth has not changed since the first jump in accurate reporting during the 2000-01 holiday period.

“We are heartened to see the press debunking the myth,” said Kathleen Hall Jamieson, director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center. “But there is still a lot of coverage that keeps the story alive.”

The new results for last year include an unusually high number of stories that merely noted that a suicide had occurred during a holiday (a coincidental association). This was mainly attributable to the heavy reporting of the suicide death of James Dungy, son of Indianapolis Colts coach Tony Dungy, around Thanksgiving. The unusually high number of stories about the link in the 1999-2000 period was attributable in part to the coming change in the millennium, which spurred considerable speculation about its effects on suicide.

Perpetuating the myth not only misinforms readers, but it also misses an opportunity to educate the public about the most likely source of suicide risk, mental illness, according to Dan Romer, director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center’s Adolescent Risk Communication Institute, and lead researcher for this study. Persons suffering from major depression and other treatable mental conditions are at increased risk of suicide and getting help from an appropriate health professional can reduce symptoms and prevent suicide. The press can help those suffering from these conditions to seek help before it’s too late.

Suicide ranks as the eighth leading cause of death among adults; among adolescents, it is the third leading cause.

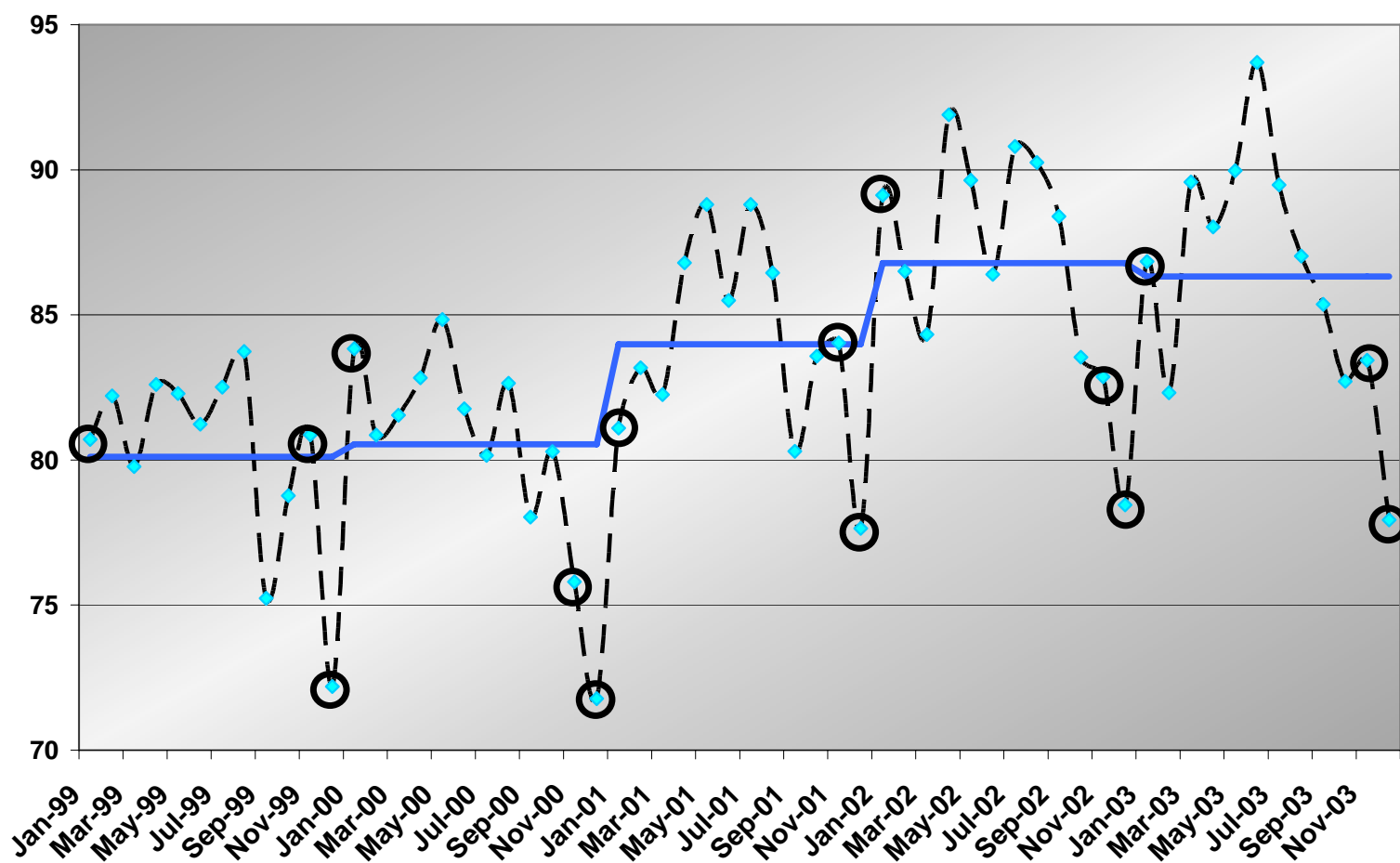
<http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/factsheets/suifacts.htm>.

More information about suicide and reporting that can avoid the copycat effect is available at the following:

[National Center for Injury Prevention and Control \(Centers for Disease Control\)](#)

http://www.afsp.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.viewpage&page_id=7852EBBC-9FB2-6691-54125A1AD4221E49

Figure 1. Suicide Average Daily Rate per Month



Note: Months of November, December and January are circled. Average annual rate is indicated by flat line each year.

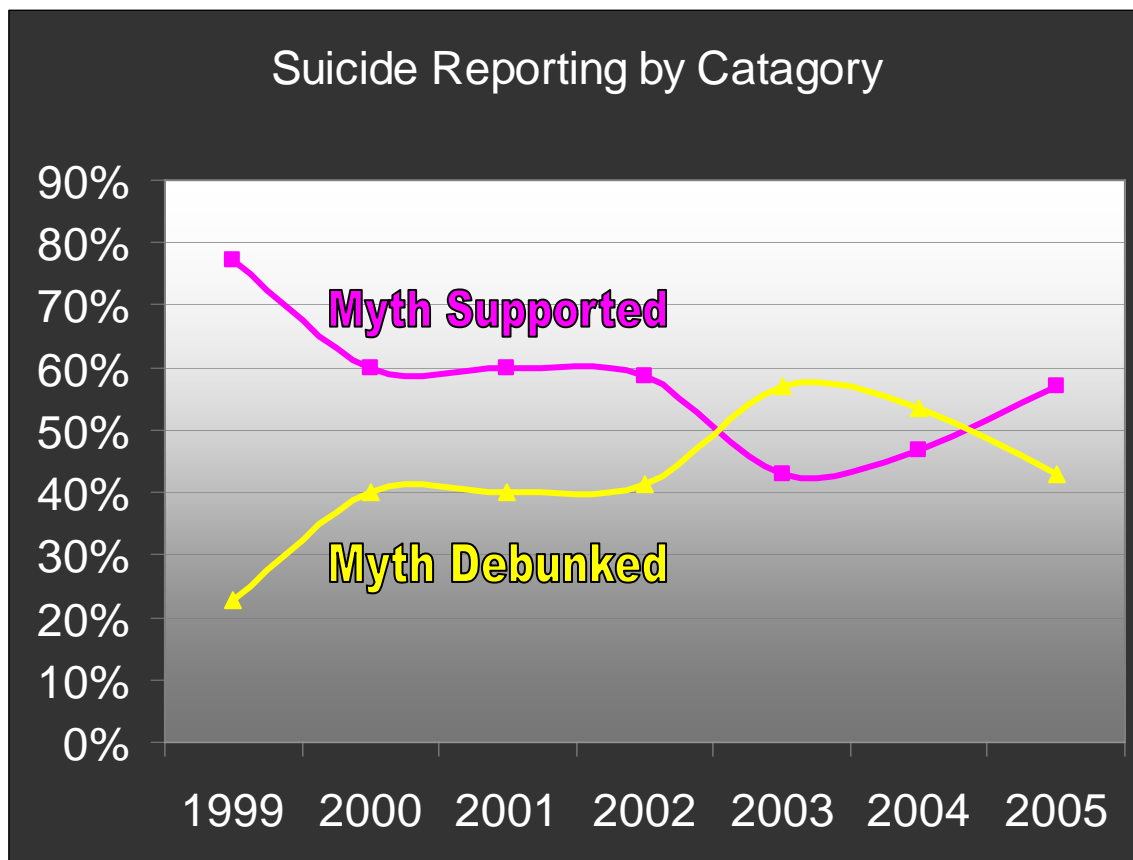
Source: National Center for Health Statistics.

Table 1. National search results of stories linking the holidays with suicide for years 1999 to 2005.

Type of News Story by Year	1999 - 2000	2000 - 2001	2001 - 2002	2002 - 2003	2003 - 2004	2004 - 2005	2005 - 2006
Holiday Link	101	35	30	29	14	30	28
Myth Supported	77%	60%	60%	59%	43%	47%	57%
Myth Debunked	23%	40%	40%	41%	57%	53%	43%
Coincidental	36	19	24	17	6	14	89
Total	137	54	54	46	20	44	117

Note: Stories were coded into three categories: ones in which the myth was supported versus clearly debunked as false (Holiday Link). Other stories in which suicide and the holidays were linked but no causal association was suggested are termed coincidental.

Figure 2. Percentage of stories that supported the myth versus debunked it between the 1999 to 2005 holiday periods.



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 the search terms. Coders independently evaluated the stories for content either supporting the link, simply noting that a suicide occurred on or near a holiday, or actually debunking the myth.

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 Risk Communication Institute was established in 2002 to focus on strategies that promote the mental and behavioral health of adolescents.