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**Holiday-Suicide Link
Newspapers Turn the Corner**

Newspapers are close to putting to rest the myth that the holidays increase the risk of suicide. A new study shows a dramatic drop in articles that – despite having no basis in fact – attribute the arrival of the holiday season with an uptick in suicides.

An analysis of newspaper reporting released today by the Annenberg Public Policy Center shows that only nine percent of articles written during last year’s holiday season (2006-2007) about suicides perpetuated the myth. That represents a statistically significant drop from the previous holiday period when more than 50 percent supported the myth (see Table 1). The majority of last season’s stories debunked the myth.

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 2004, 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.

“Although it has taken seven years to see a significant drop in reporting, the message may have finally registered with the many reporters who describe people’s challenges during the holiday season,” said Dan Romer, the director of Annenberg’s Adolescent Risk Communication Institute which conducted the study. “We hope the same pattern holds this year.”

The percentage of stories debunking the holiday-suicide myth has steadily increased since the Center began releasing its annual analysis. 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. However, the percentage of stories that discredited the link never went over 57% since that time.

“We are heartened to see the press changing the way it reports this story,” said Kathleen Hall Jamieson, director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center. “It is essential that the public be given accurate information on this important subject.”

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, according to Romer. That is mental illness. Persons suffering from major depression and other treatable mental conditions are at increased risk of suicide. Getting help from an appropriate health professional can reduce symptoms and prevent suicide. The press can play a role in encouraging those suffering from these conditions to seek help.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suicide ranks as the eighth leading cause of death among adults. Among adolescents, it is the third leading cause. More information about suicide and reporting that can avoid the copycat effect is available at the following:

[American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](#)

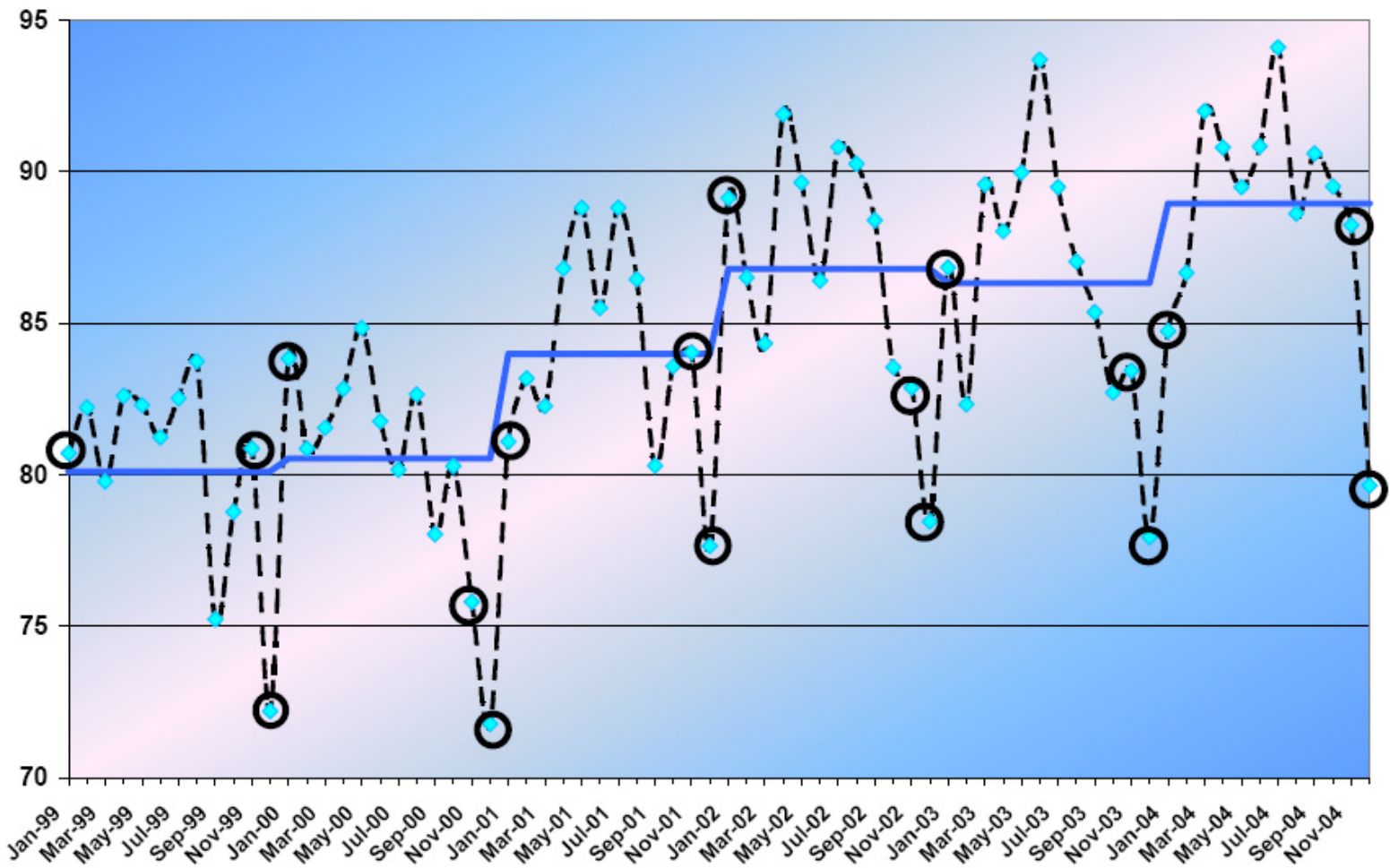
[National Center for Injury Prevention and Control](#)

Table 1. National search results of stories linking the holidays with suicide for years 1999-2006.

Type of News Story by Year	1999 - 2000	2000 - 2001	2001 - 2002	2002 - 2003	2003 - 2004	2004 - 2005	2005 - 2006	2006 - 2007
Holiday Link	101	35	30	29	14	30	28	32
Myth Supported	77%	60%	60%	59%	43%	47%	57%	9%
Myth Debunked	23%	40%	40%	41%	57%	53%	43%	91%
Coincidental	36	19	24	17	6	14	89	39
Total	137	54	54	46	20	44	117	71

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 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

Figure 2. Percentage of stories that supported the myth versus debunked it from the 1999 to 2006 holiday periods.

