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Local News Coverage of Suicides Triggers More Copycats than National News Stories

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News coverage of suicides by local television and newspapers is more likely to trigger suicide attempts in others than national news stories on the subject, according to a new study that tracked reporting and health statistics in six U.S. cities.

The study, published in the current issue of the *Journal of Communication*, is the most comprehensive and recent analysis of the influence of the news media on suicide. For the first time, local TV coverage of the subject, in addition to print coverage, was measured and weighed against official suicide data.

The cities involved in the analysis were Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, Miami, New York and San Francisco.

“This study reconfirms that, for some vulnerable people, news stories about suicide can be deadly, especially when they come from local sources,” said Daniel Romer, who co-authored the paper with Patrick E. Jamieson and Kathleen Hall Jamieson. All are affiliated with the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania.

The researchers collected news stories and broadcast transcripts describing a current case of suicide during a 123-day period in 1993. They also catalogued references to suicides in nationally televised news programming, in current movies and in popular movie rentals during that time. They examined officially reported suicide data for 10 days after each story. Because more people pay attention to local news, local stories triggered the greatest copycat response, or contagion.

“This study provides the strongest evidence to date that suicide stories to which a local audience has the greatest exposure are likely to produce contagion,” the authors found. “The effects of national television news [on suicides] were not evident during this period in any of the six cities.” Movies and other TV programming did not have a measurable impact, either.

People younger than 25 and older than 44 were the most likely to respond in kind to suicide stories, the study reported. In Chicago, Los Angeles and New York, there were statistically significant increases in deaths in the under-25 age group after local newspapers or television stations reported a suicide. In the over-44 age group, suicide rates increased in San Francisco, Denver, Miami and Chicago after newspaper accounts appeared.

“We were surprised to find that television news reporting may have had a protective effect in the 25-44 age range,” according to the authors. “It is not clear why persons in this age range should delay or give up suicide plans following news reports of suicides.” One possible explanation is that this age group waited beyond the study’s 10-day monitoring period to react to the reports.

The survey also found that the age or gender of a suicide victim described in the news accounts was irrelevant. “Simply seeing or hearing a story about someone’s suicide can trigger an imitative reaction,” said Romer, who directs the Annenberg Public Policy Center’s Adolescent Risk Communication Institute.

Although the study relied on 1993 data, news reporting on suicides has not changed dramatically since then, with the exception of wider access to news coverage online, the authors concluded.

The medium is not the most important factor for influencing behavior, said Romer. Rather, it is the message delivered.

“Stories that make suicide look like a solution for life’s problems can encourage those who are vulnerable to do the same,” said Romer. “The role of mental illness [in suicides] is seldom discussed, nor are ways to get help.”

Since 2001, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and the Annenberg Public Policy Center, in collaboration with several federal health agencies, have been involved in a joint effort to improve the way suicide is covered in the media. In consultation with experts in the field, guidelines were drafted to encourage responsible reporting on the subject. Those guidelines are available at [*Reporting on Suicide: Recommendations for the Media*](#).

A complete text of the *Journal of Communication* article is available here.
<http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2006.00018.x>