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Press Advisory: Explicit Description of Madoff Suicide Method Risks Imitation

Recent coverage of Bernard Madoff's son's suicide violates evidence-driven media guidelines jointly developed by the CDC, NIMH, the Surgeon General, SAMHSA, two suicide prevention foundations and the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania. Specifically, research suggests that explicit description of a method increases the likelihood that vulnerable individuals will kill themselves using that method (for a copy of the guidelines go to [American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](http://www.afsp.org)). Furthermore, the prominent and heavy coverage of the suicide increases the influence of the story (see abstract below).

Details of the method included within the opening paragraphs of the new reports included "found hanged with a dog leash attached to a living room ceiling pipe" (*Wall Street Journal*), "was found suspended by a dog's leash from a steel beam in his Manhattan condominium" (*USA Today*), "hanging from a black dog leash attached to a metal beam on the living room ceiling" (*New York Times*), "hanging from a dog leash attached to a pipe in the living room of his Manhattan apartment" (*Bloomberg Business Week*), "hanging from a dog leash that had been fashioned into a noose and strung over a pipe in the ceiling of his living room" (*Time/CNN*), "hanged himself Saturday by a dog leash on a metal ceiling beam in his Manhattan loft apartment" (*Washington Post*). The *New York Post* showed a front-page picture of Mark Madoff walking his dog with an enlargement of the leash presumably used in the suicide.

Daniel Romer, Patrick E. Jamieson, & Kathleen H. Jamieson (2006). Are news reports of suicide contagious? A stringent test in six US cities. *Journal of Communication*, 56, 253-270.

Past evidence of suicidal contagion from news reports in the United States is based largely on national data prior to 1980 using proxies for suicide stories rather than local news sources. Our research examined more proximal effects of suicide news reporting for 4 months in 1993 in 6 U.S. cities controlling for a wide range of alternative sources of media and interpersonal influence. In addition, predictions for the effect based on suicide contagion theories were examined for 3 age groups (15–25, 25–44, and older than 44). Local television news was associated with increased incidence of deaths by suicide among persons younger than 25 years. Newspaper reports were associated with suicide deaths for both young persons and persons older than 44 years. An unexpected protective effect of television news reports was observed in the 25–44 age range; nevertheless, news reporting was associated with an aggregate increase in suicide deaths. The results support theories of media contagion but also suggest that media depiction can inhibit suicide among some audience members.

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