



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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The Media and the Holiday Suicide Myth Press Reporting of the Link Declines

The arrival of the holiday season guarantees the predictable menu of stories from the news media: The retail mayhem of Black Friday; the year's must-have toys and electronics; the forlorn last-minute shopper. One familiar standby appears to be fading from the scene, however: The surge in suicides at year's end.

Despite data collected by the National Center for Health Statistics (see Figure 1 below) indicating that suicide rates are at their lowest in December, while peaking in the spring and fall, the holiday-suicide myth has been perpetuated by reporters reluctant to give up the ultimate, counterintuitive take on the season of good cheer.

"While it might make the story more interesting to make a connection between Thanksgiving, Christmas or New Years and suicide rates, 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, director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania.

Since 2000, the Annenberg Public Policy Center has analyzed newspaper articles linking end-of-year holidays and suicide. New data (see Table 1 and Figure 2), released today, show that reporters may finally be checking the statistics before writing. 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 18% of the stories that made a link between the holidays and suicide debunked the myth.

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In the 2004-05 holiday period, slightly over 36% of the stories noted that the association is untrue.

The new results, based on a review of over 300 stories published over a six-year period, also show a drop in the number of stories in which the holiday-suicide link is mentioned or suggested. But journalists aren't entirely out of the accuracy woods yet, according to research director Dr. Dan Romer:

“Despite our efforts to get out the word about the holiday-suicide myth, there are columnists and reporters who still make the link. Hopefully we will see even fewer stories with this misinformation during the current holiday season.”

Reporting erroneous information isn't the only problem with perpetuating the holiday-suicide myth, says Romer, who is Director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center's Adolescent Risk Communication Institute. Although there is no solid evidence that repeating the myth encourages vulnerable individuals to commit suicide, news reports of suicides can have a “copy-cat” effect among such persons. 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>.

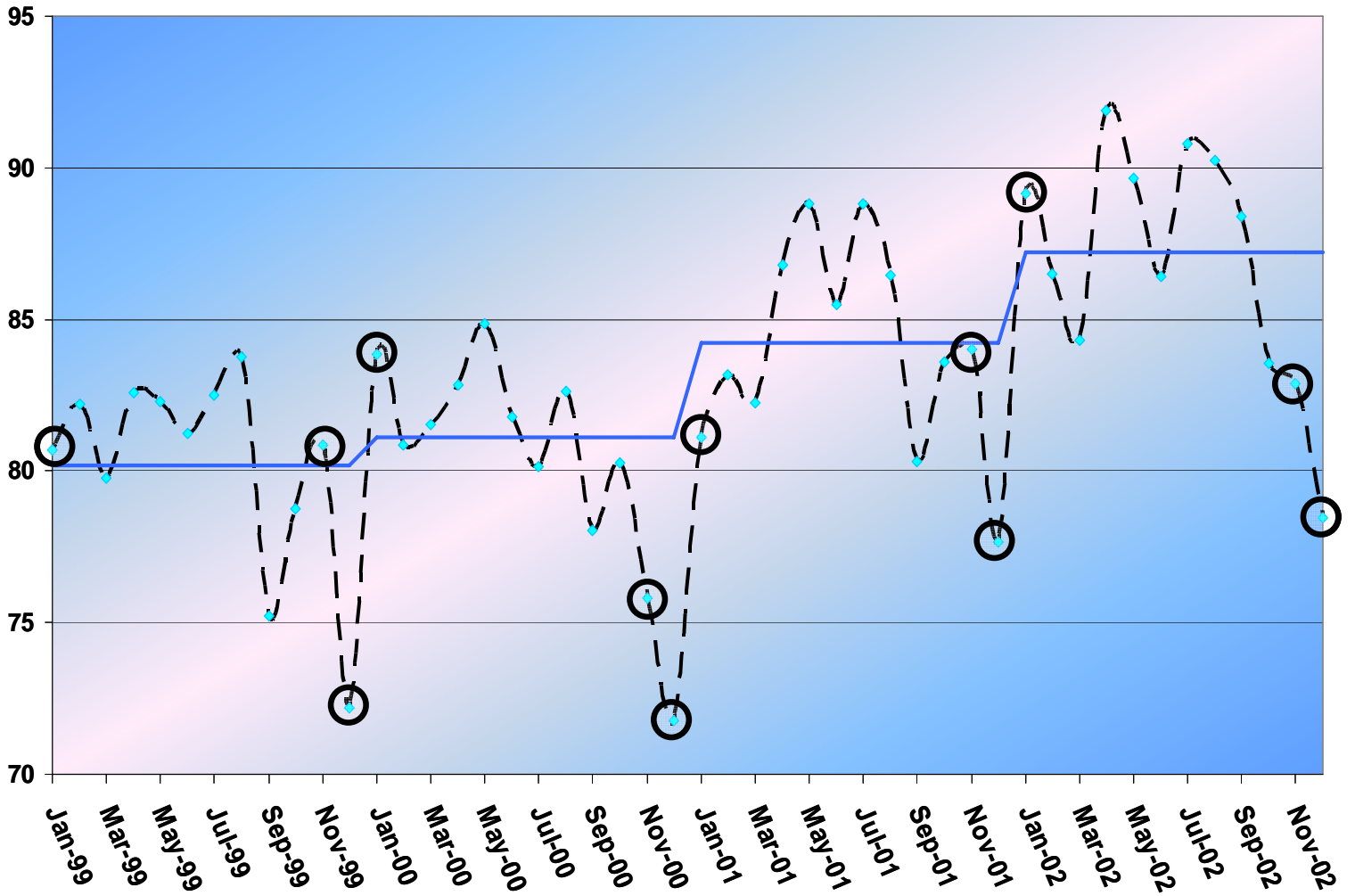
Jamieson notes that: “The media need to act responsibly on this sensitive topic. The holiday-suicide myth needs to be identified for what it is: A myth with no basis in fact.”

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/education/recommendations/index.html>

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.

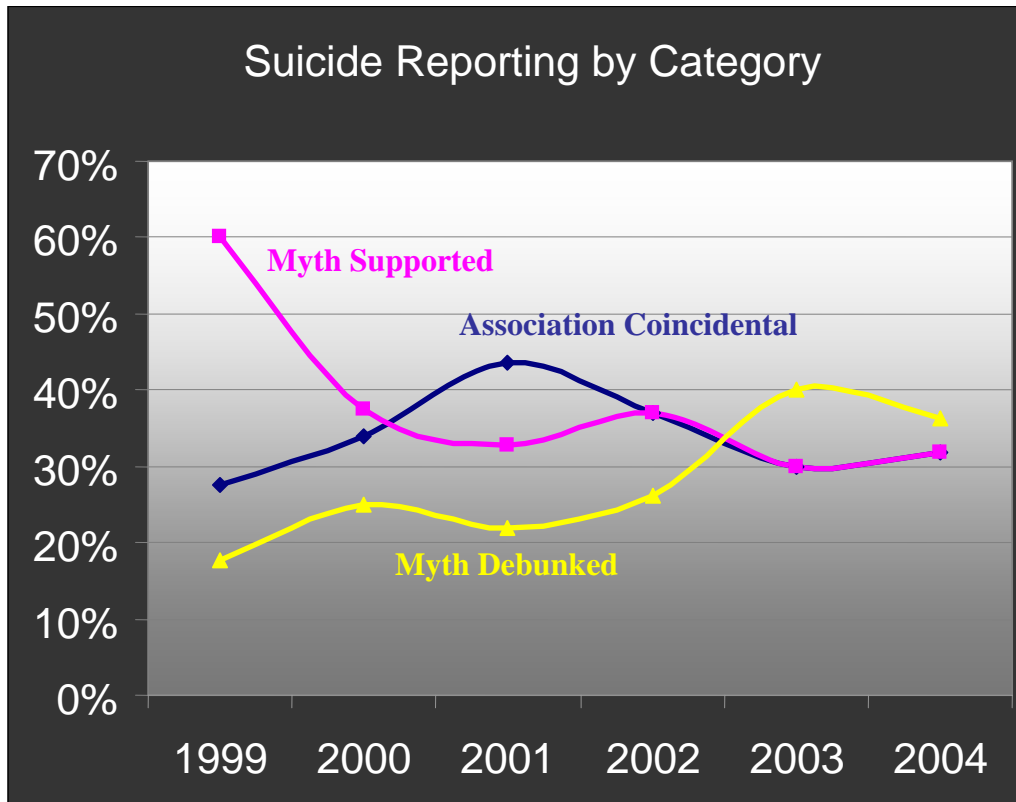
Table 1. National search results for six years of the reported link between the end of year holidays and suicide.

Year	1999*	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Number of Stories	128	56	55	46	20	44
Type of Story						
Association Coincidental	27.69%	33.93%	43.64%	36.96%	30.00%	31.82%
Myth Supported	60.00%	37.50%	32.73%	36.96%	30.00%	31.82%
Myth Debunked	17.69%	25.00%	21.82%	26.09%	40.00%	36.36%

Note: Stories were coded into three categories: ones in which the myth was supported; others in which suicide and the holidays were linked but the association was coincidental; and ones in which the myth was clearly debunked as false.

*Totals may be greater than 100% due to overlap in categories

Figure 2. Percentage of stories that made the link between the holidays and suicide for holiday periods during years 1999 to 2004.



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. The Adolescent Risk Communication Institute was established in 2002 to focus on the media's role in promoting the mental and behavioral health of adolescents.

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