

CaMHSA Suicide Prevention Social Marketing Project- Baseline Media Analysis



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Executive Summary

Appropriate reporting on suicide can relay accurate facts, raise awareness about the preventability of suicide and educate the public on resources and treatment options. When suicides are not reported on appropriately, the media can also indirectly transmit suicide contagion—the process by which one suicide becomes a compelling model for successive suicides. Efforts to reduce contagion led to the development of a national consensus *The Recommendations for Reporting on Suicide* (“the Recommendations”) for reporting on suicide.

The California Suicide Prevention Social Marketing Project, funded by the voter-approved Mental Health Services Act (MHSA) (Prop. 63), aims to improve reporting on suicide through training individuals in counties on media outreach, providing counties with a guide to media advocacy, conducting forums with journalists and other stakeholders and disseminating the Recommendations to news media throughout the state. It is overseen by the California Mental Health Services Authority (CalMHSA), an organization of county governments working to improve mental health outcomes for individuals, families and communities. To measure how effective these interventions will be, the project conducted the nation’s first study to examine how well news media currently adhere to the Recommendations. The authors created a unique tool to measure California media outlets’ adherence and applied it to a sample of more than 200 recent reports to establish a baseline measure.

The following pages report on the findings in 12 areas: coverage type; resources; how to help; warning signs and risk factors; attributing suicide to a single condition; reporting on location; reporting on method; sources of quotes; content of suicide notes; language used; reporting on numbers and rates; and visuals.

The results of this study show that California newspaper and television coverage of suicide during the last six months of 2011 did not consistently adhere to the *Recommendations for Reporting on Suicide*. Although sensational reporting was not the usual practice, it was determined that much more could be done to promote the concepts of preventability, inform the public about available resources and reduce graphic coverage.

California news media showed the strongest degree of adherence to the Recommendations in places where they *discourage* certain reporting practices, such as providing details about method, or using sensational language. Very few articles or broadcasts sensationalized suicide or provided overly graphic descriptions of method. The Recommendations discourage these practices because they can increase the risk for contagion and they provide misinformation about suicide to the community.

The lowest degree of adherence to the Recommendations was in areas that *encourage* providing helpful resources and interviewing suicide prevention and mental health professionals as reliable sources of information. The Recommendations call for these practices because they further the message of the preventability of suicide and make the community aware of resources that provide help. Much more can be done to routinely provide crisis telephone numbers when reporting on suicide and to cover prevention programs and activities.

An analysis of California coverage will be repeated in 2014 to examine reporting during the last six months of 2013 and any changes that may result from these interventions.

Introduction

The news media—journalists, editors and producers who report news via newspapers, radio, television and the internet—can have a powerful influence on how the public perceives suicide. Appropriate reporting on suicide can relay accurate facts, raise awareness about the preventability of suicide and educate the public on resources and treatment options. When suicides are not reported on appropriately, the media can also indirectly transmit suicide contagion, which is the process by which one suicide becomes a compelling model for successive suicides (Gould, 2001). Research has shown that extensive newspaper coverage of suicide is associated with a significant increase in the rate of suicide. The magnitude of the increase is proportional to the amount, duration and prominence of the media coverage (Gould, 2001).

Efforts to reduce contagion led to the development of a national consensus recommendations for reporting on suicide.¹ *The Recommendations for Reporting on Suicide* (“the Recommendations”) provides suggestions to the news media on how best to address suicide. According to the recommendations, covering suicide carefully, even briefly, can change public misperceptions and correct myths, which can encourage those who are vulnerable or at risk to seek help. For more information on the Recommendations, visit www.reportingonsuicide.org.

The California Suicide Prevention Social Marketing Project² aims to improve reporting on suicide through several interventions—training individuals in counties on how to do media outreach, providing counties with a guide to media outreach, conducting forums with journalists and other stakeholders and disseminating the Recommendations to news media throughout the state. To measure how effective these interventions will be, the project conducted the first study in the nation to examine how well news media currently adhere to the Recommendations. The authors created a unique tool to measure California media outlets’ adherence to the Recommendations and applied it to a sample of more than 200 recent reports in order to establish a baseline measure.

¹ The first set of recommendations was created by Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in response to reporting on a cluster of suicides that occurred in New Jersey in 1987. In 2001, new recommendations were created by a group of two national suicide prevention organizations, four federal agencies and a journalism think tank. The Suicide Prevention Resource Center created a brief “at-a-glance” version of these recommendations in 2005. The current set of recommendations for reporting on suicide, released in 2011, was agreed on by 50 suicide prevention experts, advocacy groups, research institutions and media organizations, making them *consensus recommendations*. The recommendations are also grounded in research that demonstrates how certain depictions of suicide can lead to contagion.

² The California Suicide Prevention Social Marketing Project is part of the broader California Suicide Prevention Initiative, funded by the California Mental Health Service Authority (CalMHSA). This Project is being implemented by staff from AdEase, the Education Development Center and Your Social Marketer.

Past Studies Analyzing Adherence to Established Recommendations

A handful of studies have been published that examine the media's adherence to established recommendations for reporting on suicide. The following summarizes findings from some past studies.

The first study to analyze adherence to established reporting recommendations (Jamieson, et al., 2003) reviewed three years (1990, 1995, and 1999) of suicide articles ($n = 279$) published in *The New York Times*, and measured their adherence to the 1994 CDC Media Guidelines. The analysis determined that the articles did not focus on the link between diagnosable mental disorders and suicide but on a single precursor to the suicide, such as a negative life event. The authors concluded that readers were unlikely to learn much about the likely cause of suicide or to understand the importance of seeking treatment for mental disorders that are known to increase the risk of suicide.

Another study looked at the adherence of five major Hong Kong newspapers to the 2000 World Health Organization (WHO) media guidelines (Fu & Yip, 2008). This study examined 5,740 articles to analyze how papers reported on suicide before and after the implementation of an awareness campaign about the WHO guidelines. Prior to the campaign, the majority of news articles about suicide were accompanied by a photograph, mentioned the suicide method in the headline and described the circumstances surrounding the method in the headline. Following the campaign, there were significant decreases in the pictorial presentation of suicide and in the number of news articles with headlines describing the circumstances surrounding the suicide.

Tatum et al. (2010) conducted a national study that looked at 968 suicide articles published in select daily regional and national newspapers between 2002 and 2003 to determine adherence to the 2001 recommendations. The study found that coverage did not consistently reflect the media guidelines. Suicide stories often detailed the method and location while rarely providing information about warning signs and risk factors, the influence of mental disorders and substance abuse, and the availability of prevention resources.

Each of these studies was limited in that they were 1) cross-sectional with no follow-up analyses; 2) based solely on newspaper articles; and 3) not based on the results of an intervention to change how the media reports on suicide. In addition, no existing study has examined adherence to the most recent version of the Recommendations.

The California Study on Media Adherence to National Consensus Recommendations for Reporting on Suicide

Methods

Retrieving print media sample

The project staff used Lexis-Nexis (www.nexis.com) to search for relevant articles published in California-based newspapers from July 1 to December 31, 2011. Weekly newspapers, business papers and newspapers published in languages other than English were excluded. A total of 57 newspaper sources were available using these search criteria. The search terms used included "suicide" and "killed self". Use of the term metaphorically, such as "political suicide" or "economic suicide" was excluded for the search. Obituaries and op-eds were excluded from the final sample as were articles that were a) fewer than 50 words; b) exact duplicates of other news

articles; c) discussed suicide only in passing; or d) deaths that had not yet been ruled a suicide. A final sample of 228 news articles from 28 California newspapers was collected.

Retrieving television broadcast media sample

The project staff used Vocus (www.vocus.com) to search for relevant news broadcasts originating from California-based television stations. The broadcasts were gathered from the first two weeks of each month, July through December, 2011. The search term used was “suicide” with the same exclusions of metaphorical usage. Transcripts were obtained for 64 broadcast stories from 17 California broadcast stations using these search criteria. (Archived radio broadcasts were not available through Vocus.)

Homicide-suicide

Homicide-suicides constituted more than one-third of the final article and broadcast sample. The national estimate of homicide-suicide is very low compared to suicide estimates. The Violence Policy Center estimated that about 1,380 homicide-suicides occurred across the country in 2011. In comparison, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicate nearly 37,000 suicides occurred in 2009 (most recent national data available). The over-representation of homicide-suicides in the news sample indicates that these events are noteworthy. In reviewing the sample, project staff observed that homicide-suicide news stories tended to be more graphic than suicide-only reports, never provided suicide prevention resources, and often implied that the deaths were triggered by a single event or cause. However, the Recommendations do not provide guidance on how to cover homicide-suicides, and therefore these stories were excluded from the analysis.

Final sample

The final sample for analysis consisted of 161 newspaper articles and 47 television broadcasts. A subset of 19 television news segments was purchased to conduct a thorough visuals analysis. The remaining 28 broadcasts were analyzed by reading the transcripts. Newspaper articles were read in full text. This analysis describes the findings for newspaper articles, television broadcasts and “news items” (both newspaper articles and television broadcasts combined). See Figure 1 for a list of newspaper sources; Figure 2 for a list of television stations; and Figure 3 for a list of counties covered by each newspaper and television station’s designated market area (DMA).

Method of analysis

The project staff created a tool to capture each news item’s adherence to critical suggestions as outlined by the Recommendations. The tool was developed with the help of suicide prevention experts, researchers and suicide survivor advocates, all of whom were instrumental in developing the Recommendations.³

Three coders tested the tool on a sample of 20 newspaper articles that were not part of the sample and compared results. Terms were further defined and agreed on. The sample was then gathered and refined, using the exclusion criteria identified above. Coders independently analyzed their own subset of articles. Ten percent of the articles were cross-coded by another staffer to assure inter-rater reliability. Any coding discrepancies were discussed before a final decision was reached. Using the definitions that were clarified during the print media analysis, a single coder analyzed broadcast news items.

³ The authors would like to thank Ken Norton, Linda Langford, Sc.D., Eileen Zeller, Melissa Allison and Dan Reidenberg, Psy.D., for their assistance and guidance in developing the adherence tool. Their expertise and familiarity with the national Recommendations was invaluable.

Areas of Analysis

Eleven areas of analysis were developed for all news items; an additional area was included for television broadcast analysis only (see Table 1).

Table 1: Media Adherence to Reporting Recommendations Analysis Tool: Areas of Analysis

Area of Analysis	Suggestions from the Recommendations	Indicators Measured in the Adherence Tool
Coverage type	Report on suicide as a public health issue.	Whether the news item covers a suicide <i>death or attempt</i> , the <i>topic of suicide</i> (include suicide prevention efforts, new research, etc.) or <i>both</i> .
Suicide prevention resources	Include up-to-date local or national resources where readers or viewers can find treatment, information and advice that promotes help seeking.	Whether <i>specific resources</i> were provided (for example, the name and phone number to a crisis hotline). The tool also enumerated <i>the types of resources</i> that were provided.
Information on “How to Help”	Include the provided sidebar that lists information on “what to do” in the event the reader/viewer knew who exhibited the warning signs of suicide.	Whether news items provide <i>suggestions on how the reader/viewer can help</i> someone who may be exhibiting warning signs of suicide or in a suicidal crisis. The tool also enumerates the <i>types of suggestions</i> that are provided.
Information about warning signs and risk factors for suicide	Include the provided sidebar that gives information about warning signs for suicide.	Whether there was <i>at least one warning sign or risk factor</i> for suicide mentioned in the news item. These warning signs and risk factors could have been named by a person interviewed for the story, or by the reporter. Any mention of events or conditions that precipitated the suicide, whether or not they were described as warning signs or risk factors, were included in the analysis. It also lists <i>the most frequently stated warning signs and risk factors</i> .
Single condition or event prior to suicide	Avoid reports that imply that suicide or suicide attempt was preceded by a single event such as a recent job loss, divorce, or bad grades.	Whether or not there was <i>only one identified event or condition</i> preceding the suicide.
Location of suicide	Reduce or eliminate reporting	Whether <i>exact location</i> of suicide

	on details surrounding an individual's suicide.	or suicide attempt was described.
Suicide method	Reduce or eliminate reporting on details surrounding an individual's suicide.	Whether <i>explicit descriptions</i> of the method or weapon of suicide is described.
Persons quoted	Seek advice from suicide prevention experts instead of quoting or interviewing police or first responders about the causes of suicide.	Types of <i>individuals who are quoted</i> , and whether they are law enforcement, mental health or suicide prevention experts, or family and community members.
Contents of suicide note	Do not specify the contents of a suicide note. Instead, simply state that a suicide note was found, or do not mention a suicide note at all.	Whether or not the <i>contents of a suicide note</i> were revealed.
Language used to describe suicide	Use appropriate language when referring to suicide, including "died by suicide," "completed suicide" or "killed self" as opposed to "successful suicide attempt" or "failed attempt."	Whether and what <i>appropriate or inappropriate language</i> was used to describe suicide
Sensational language about numbers and rates of suicide	Do not use sensational terminology such as "epidemic" or "skyrocketing."	Whether these types of <i>sensational terms</i> are used in the news items.
Visuals (for television broadcast analysis only)	Do not include photos or videos of the location or method of death, or visuals of memorials or grieving family and friends. Instead, it encourages using a school, work or family photo, and showing hotline logos or local crisis numbers.	Types of <i>visuals</i> used, including interviews with neighbors, family and friends; photos or footage of suicide method or location; and on-scene reporting from the suicide location.

Findings

Overall, the analysis determined that the media inconsistently adhered to the Recommendations. While there were some areas of analysis that had very high levels of adherence, such as not using sensational language, there were other areas that had very low levels of adherence, such as providing too much detailed information about suicides, and failing to provide suicide prevention resources. The following pages report on the findings in 12 areas: coverage type, resources, how to help, warning signs and risk factors, attributing suicide to a single condition, reporting on location, reporting on method, sources of quotes, content of suicide notes, language used, reporting on numbers and rates, and visuals.

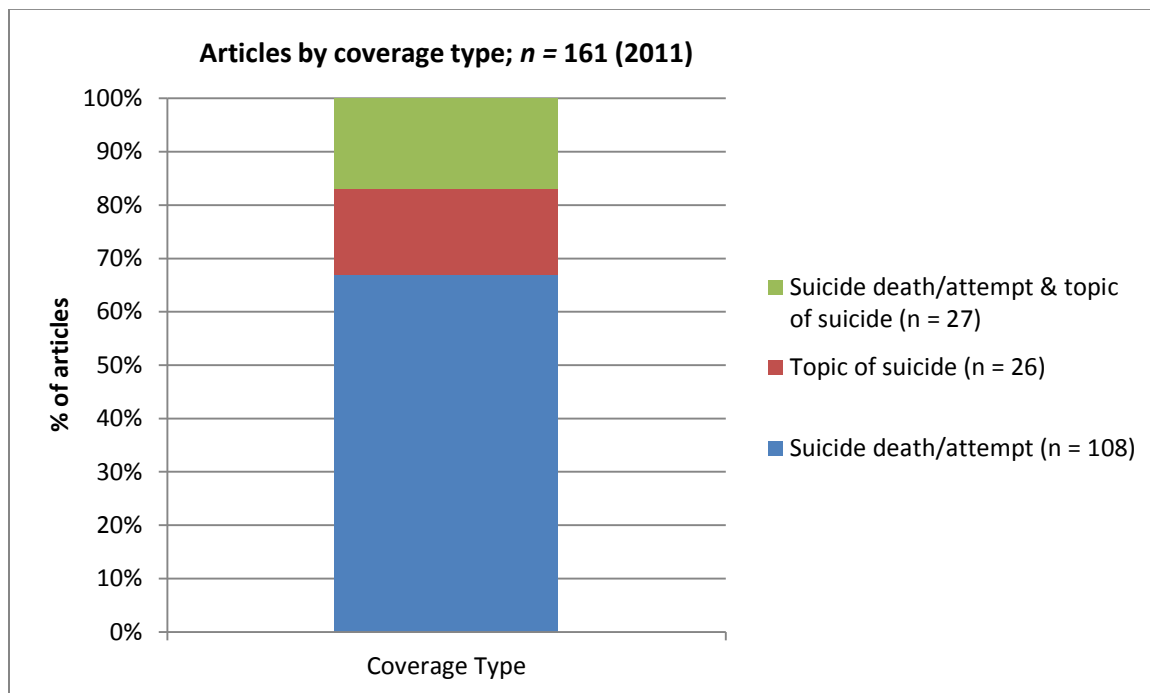
Coverage type

Most news reports covered a suicide death or attempt, with a minority covering suicide prevention events, research or prevention programs.

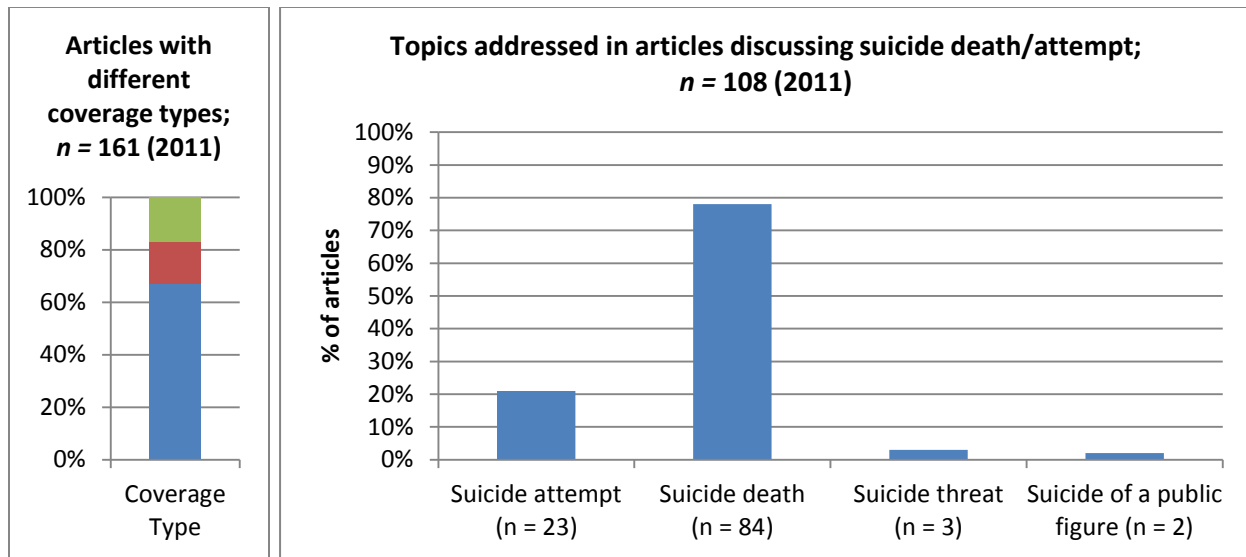
Newspaper articles

Of the 161 news articles in the sample, 67% ($n = 108$) covered a suicide or suicide attempt; 16% ($n = 26$) covered the topic of suicide; and 17% ($n = 27$) covered both a specific suicide and the general topic of suicide. A few articles covered suicide “threats” (individuals who declared their intention to die by suicide but did not harm themselves).

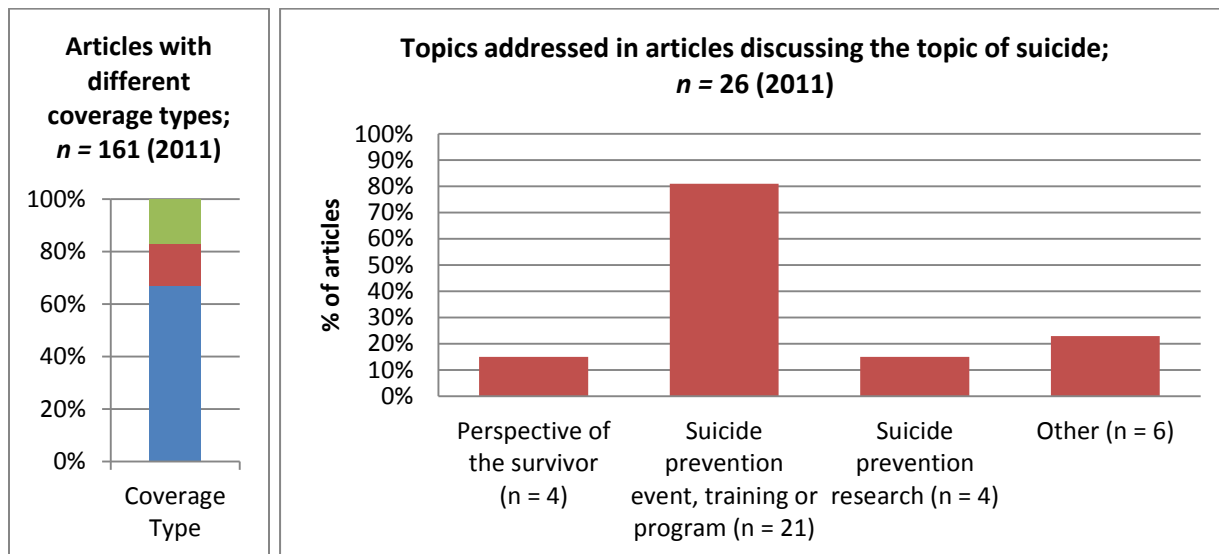
Attempts were defined as individuals who made an effort at self-harm or placed themselves in imminent danger, such as outside a bridge barrier. Threats were defined as individuals who were threatening to kill themselves but were otherwise in a safe location.



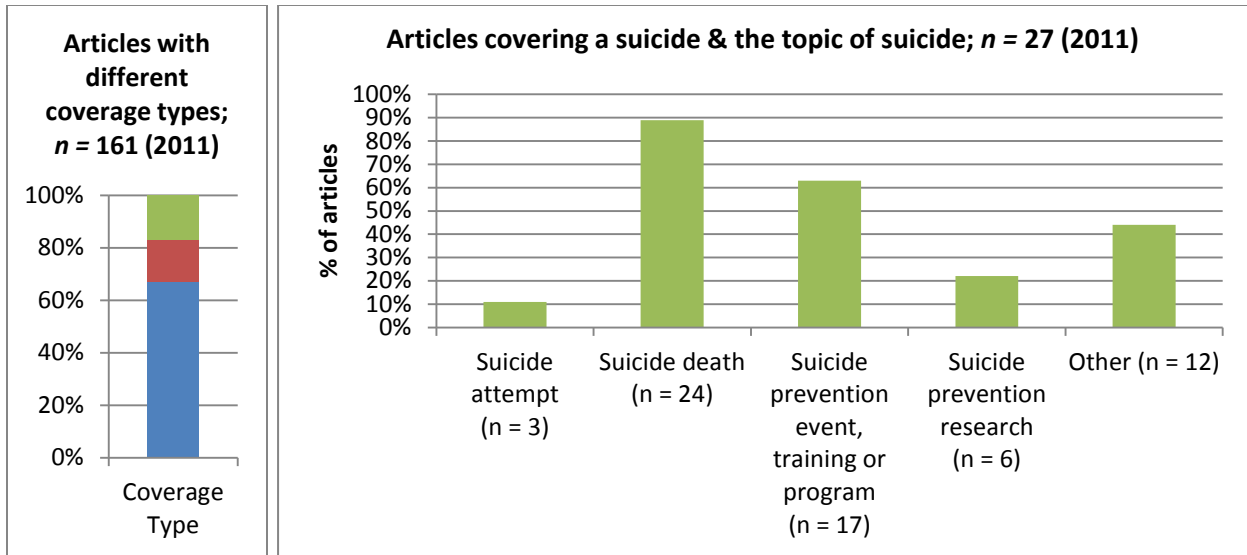
Of the 108 articles that covered a suicide, 78% ($n = 84$) covered a suicide death; 21% ($n = 23$) covered a suicide attempt; 3% ($n = 3$) covered a suicide threat; and 2% ($n = 2$) covered a suicide of a public figure.



Of the 26 articles that covered the topic of suicide, 81% ($n = 21$) covered a prevention event, training or program; 15% ($n = 4$) covered the perspective of a survivor (those who have lost someone to suicide); 15% ($n = 4$) covered new research; and 23% ($n = 6$) covered another type of topic related to suicide, including prevention legislation, Presidential addresses on suicide and fund drives.

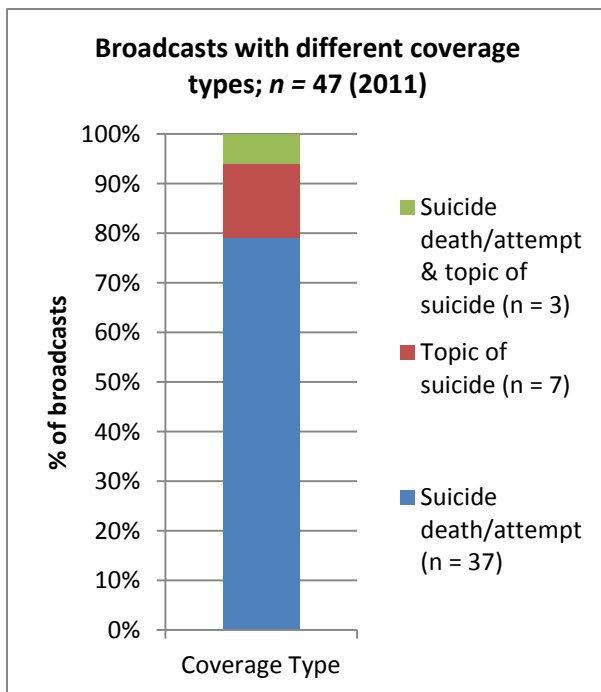


Of the 27 articles that covered both a suicide *and* the topic of suicide, 11% ($n = 3$) covered an attempt while 89% ($n = 24$) covered a suicide death; 63% ($n = 17$) covered a suicide prevention event, training or program; 22% ($n = 6$) covered research on suicide or suicide prevention; and 44% ($n = 12$) covered another type of topic including the stigma of mental illness and suicide, Presidential addresses on suicide, links between hoarding and suicide, survivor support groups, activism, fund drives and prevention legislation.

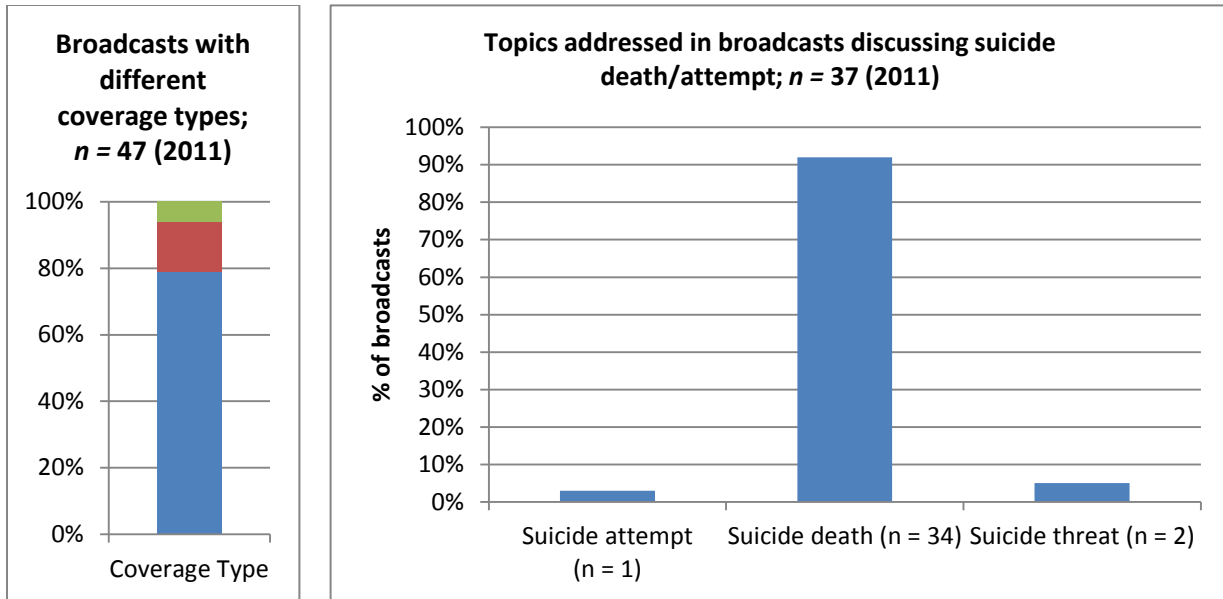


Television broadcasts

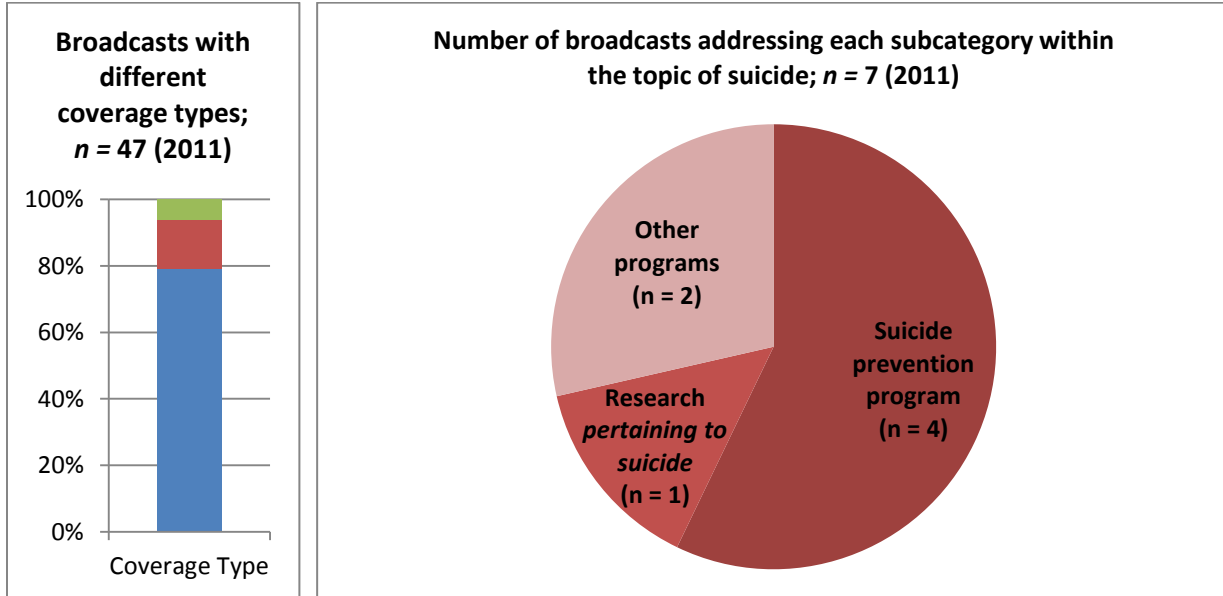
Of the 47 broadcasts in the sample, 79% (n = 37) covered a death or suicide attempt; 15% (n = 7) covered only the topic of suicide; and 6% (n = 3) covered both a suicide and the topic of suicide.



Of the 37 broadcasts that covered a suicide, 92% (n = 34) covered a death; 3% (n = 1) covered an attempt; and 5% (n = 2) covered a threat.



Of the 7 broadcasts that covered the topic of suicide, 4 covered a suicide prevention program, 1 covered research pertaining to suicide, and 2 covered other programs that address suicide.⁴



Three broadcasts covered both a suicide *and* the topic of suicide.⁵

⁴ Percentages not provided due to small numbers

⁵ Graph and subcategories not provided due to small numbers.

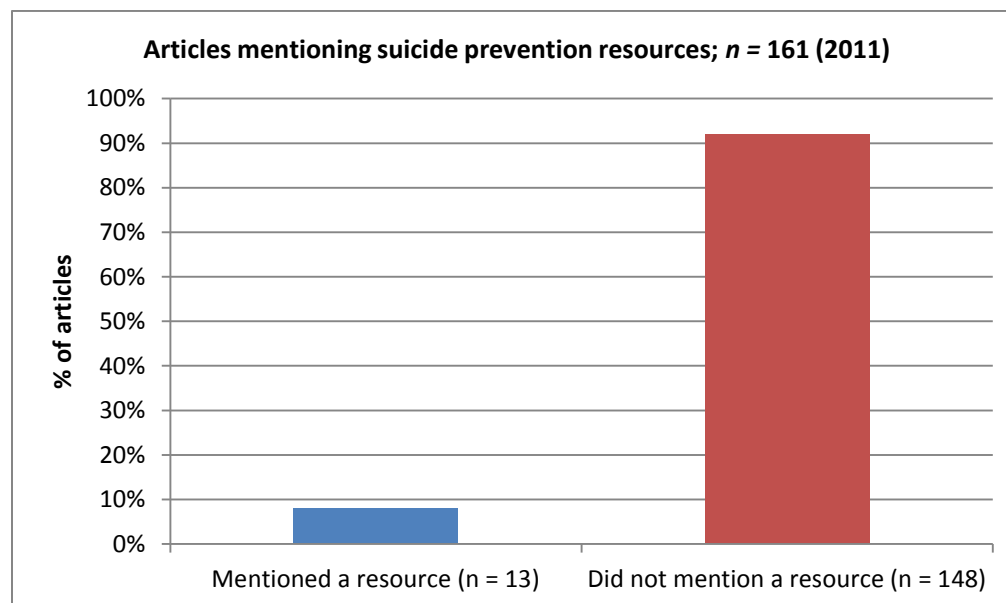
Suicide prevention resources

Very few newspaper articles mentioned any type of resource for suicide prevention. Furthermore, only one television news story provided information on a crisis hotline or how to help someone in crisis. The Recommendations urge reporters to routinely include information on prevention resources.

Any mention of a resource, whether contact information was provided or not, was included in this analysis.

Newspaper articles

Only 8% ($n = 13$) of the 161 news articles in the sample mentioned any kind of resource for suicide prevention, such as a crisis line.



Prevention resources mentioned in 13 articles were:⁶

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (9 mentions)

Local crisis line (3)

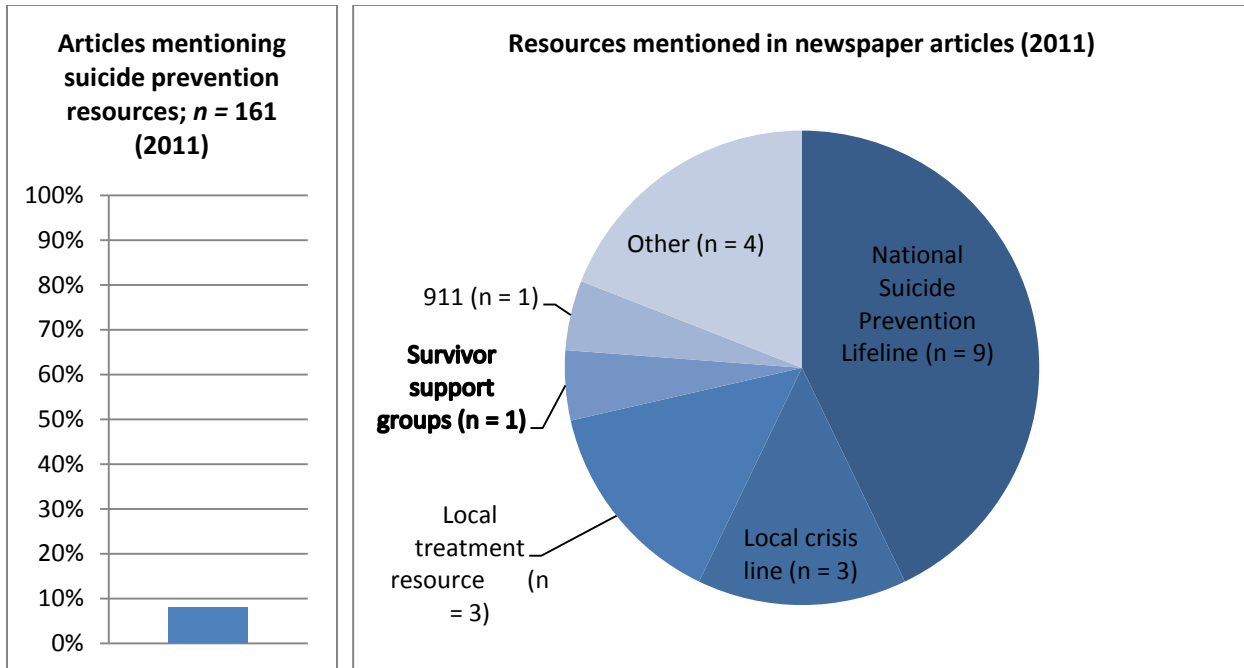
Local treatment resources (3)

Survivor support groups (1)

9-1-1 (1)

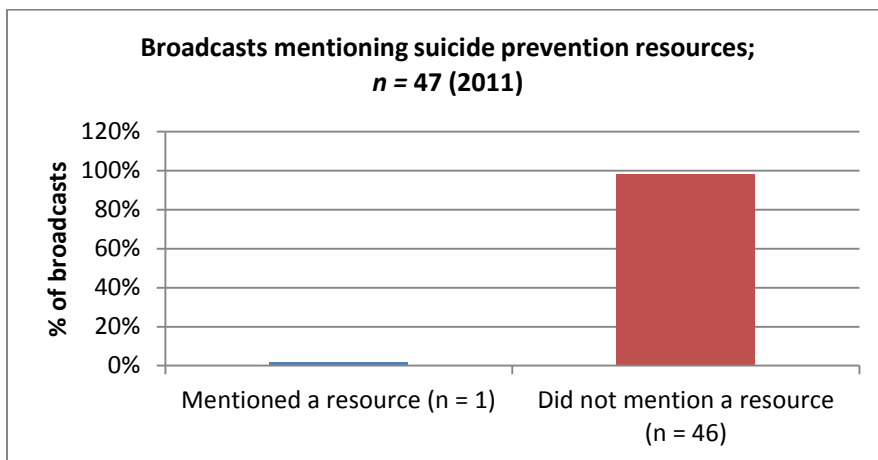
Other types of resources including suicide prevention advocacy websites (4), 2-1-1, youth service programs, domestic violence hotlines, and other support groups not related to survivors

⁶ Percentages not provided due to small numbers.



Television broadcasts

Only 2% (n = 1) of the 47 broadcasts provided information on a suicide prevention resource. This resource was a local crisis hotline.

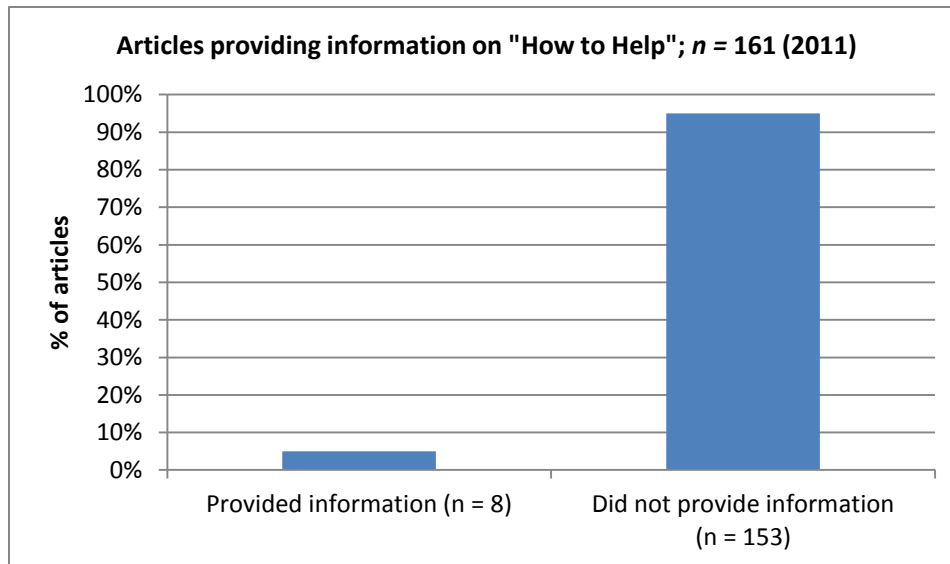


Information on “How to Help”

Very few new items provided information on how to help an individual who may be in crisis. The Recommendations encourage inclusion of this information.

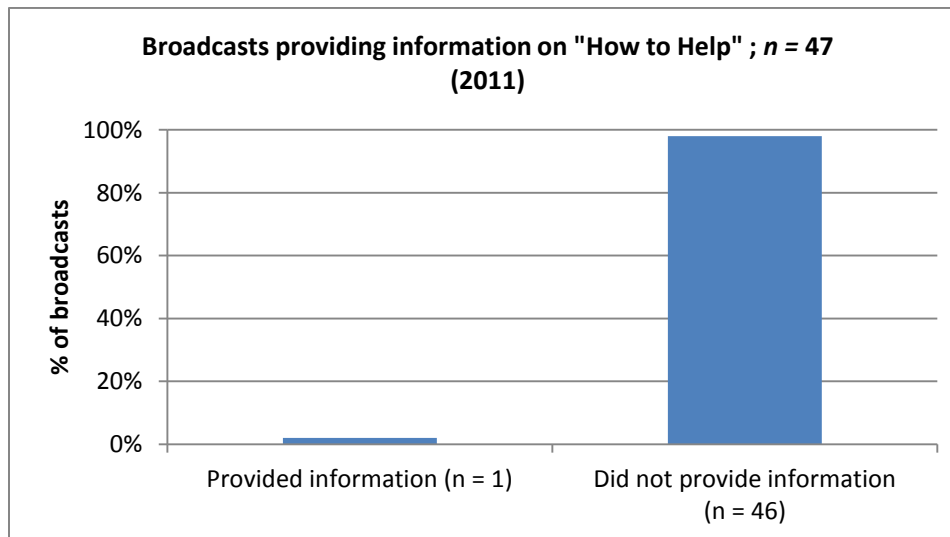
Newspaper articles

Only 5% ($n = 8$) of the 161 newspaper articles provided information on what to do to help someone who may be in a suicidal crisis.



Television broadcasts

Only 2% ($n = 1$) of the 47 broadcasts gave information on how to help a person who may be in a suicidal crisis. The advice given was to “ask the person if they are suicidal,” which is not in accordance with what the Recommendations suggest.



Information about warning signs and risk factors for suicide

The majority of newspaper articles did not provide any information about warning signs or risk factors for suicide. None of the broadcast stories provided any information about warning signs. The Recommendations encourage reporting that indicates that many people give warning of their intentions and that some people are at greater risk for suicide.

Any mention of an event or characteristic that may have contributed to a suicide was included as either a risk factor or warning sign in the analysis, regardless of whether the article described it in those terms.

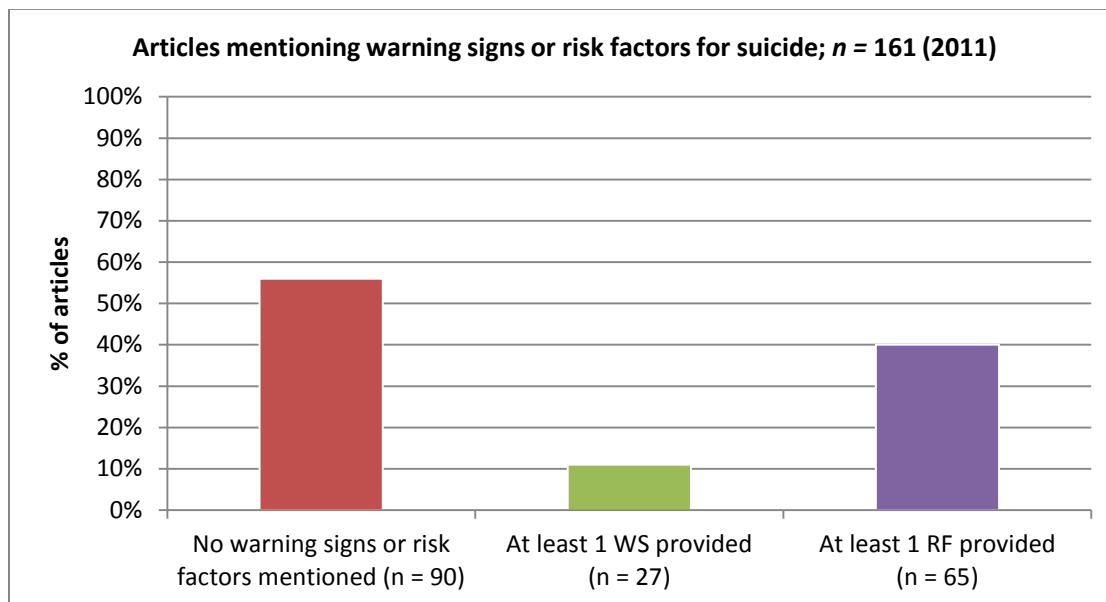
Newspaper articles

Of the 161 articles in the sample:

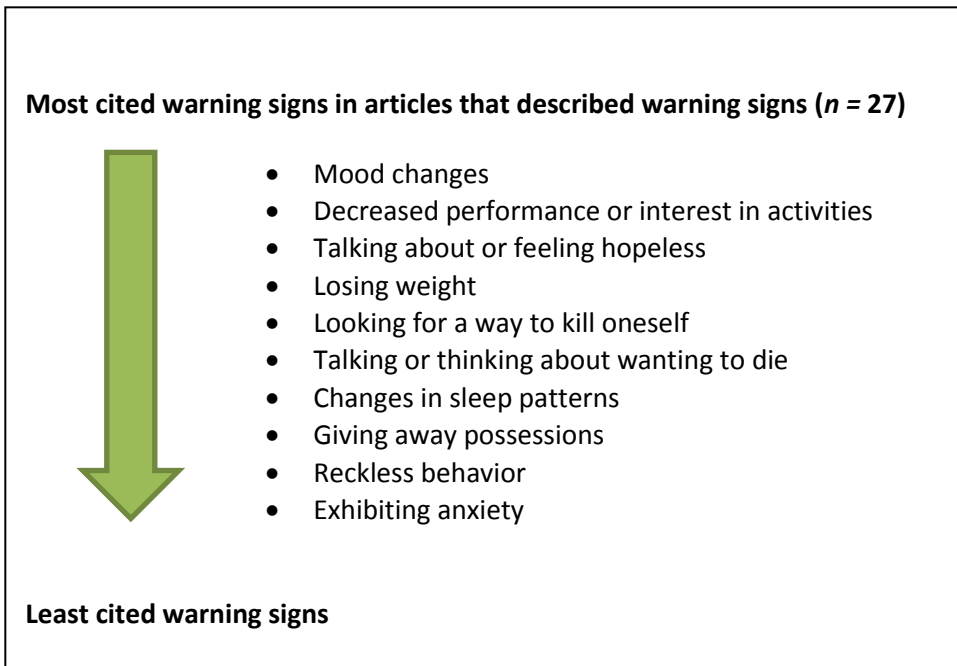
56% ($n = 90$) did not provide any indication of warning signs or risk factors for suicide

11% ($n = 27$) mentioned at least 1 warning sign

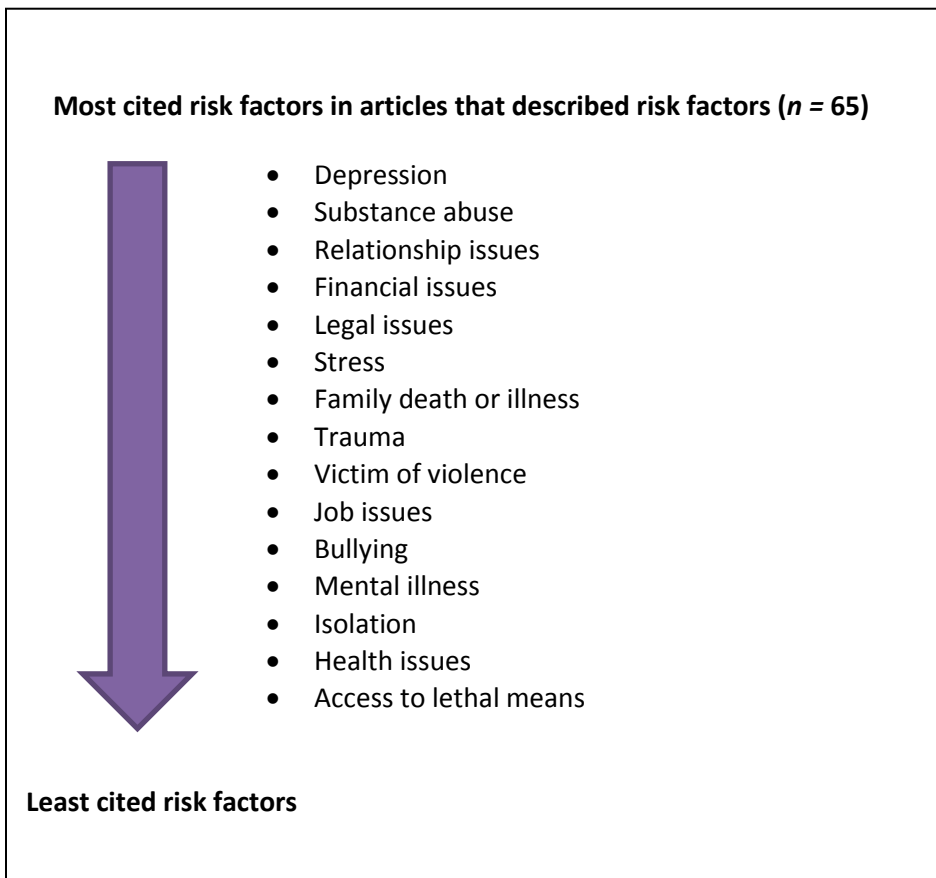
40% ($n = 65$) mentioned at least 1 risk factor



The following warning signs were mentioned in some way in the articles:



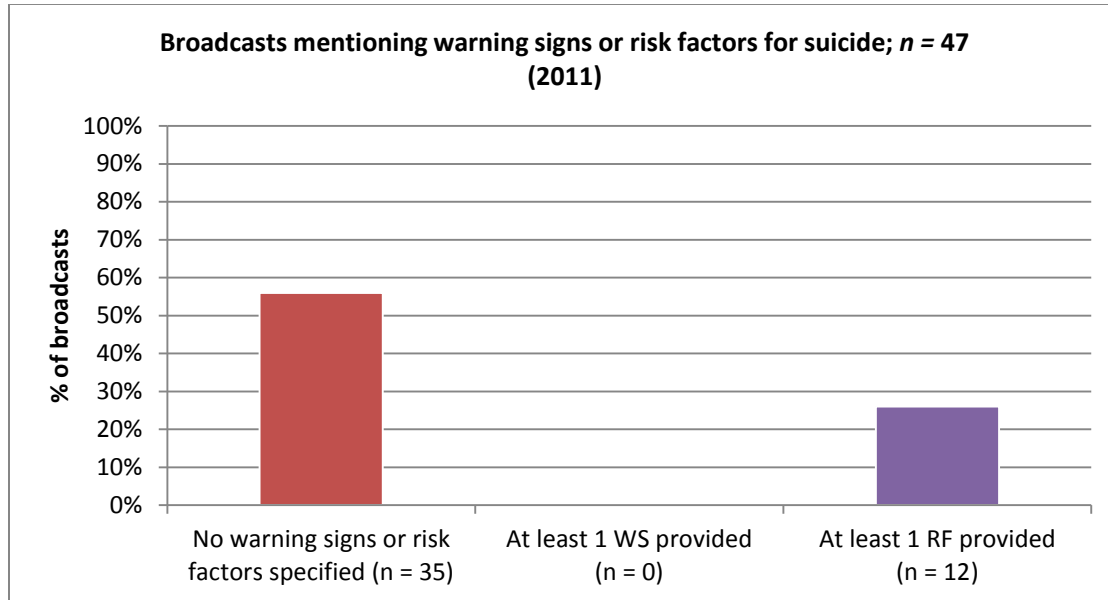
The following risk factors were mentioned in some way in the articles:



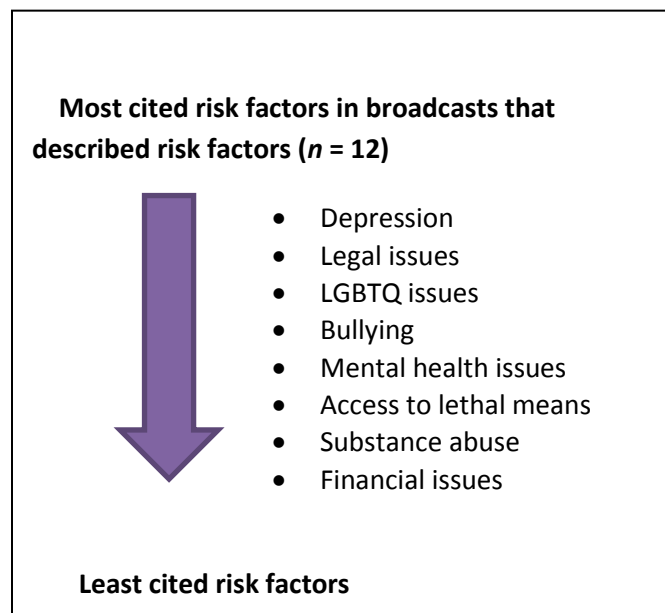
74% ($n = 35$) did not provide any indication of warning signs or risk factors, either for a suicide or for suicides in general

None of the broadcasts provided information about warning signs for suicide

26% ($n = 12$) provided information about a person's risk for suicide or general risk factors for suicide



Of the 12 broadcasts that mentioned possible risk factors for suicide, the following risk factors were referred to:

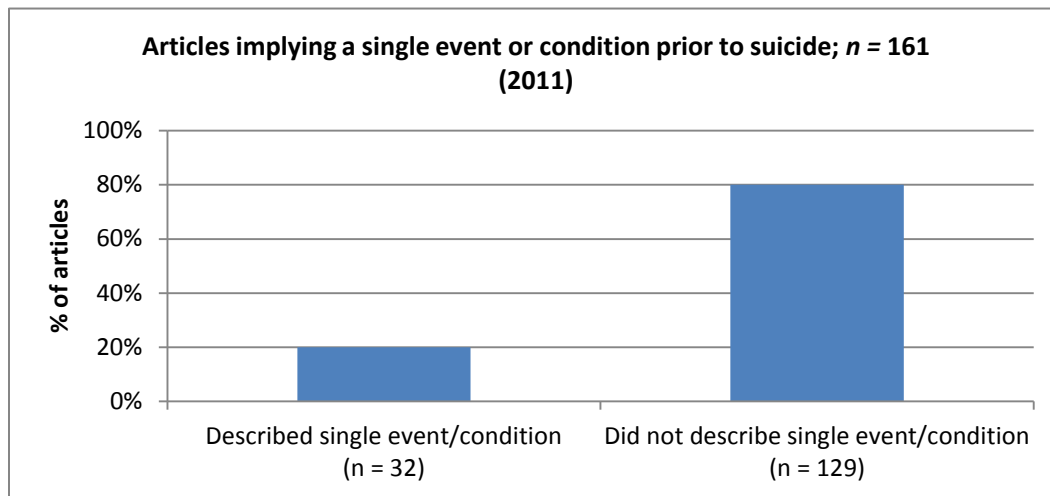


Single condition or event prior to suicide

One fifth of the newspaper articles indicated or implied that a single event or condition precipitated the suicide death or attempt. Nearly half of the television broadcasts described a single preceding event or condition that precipitated the suicide death or attempt. The Recommendations discourage reporting that implies that a single cause or simple reason contributed to suicide.

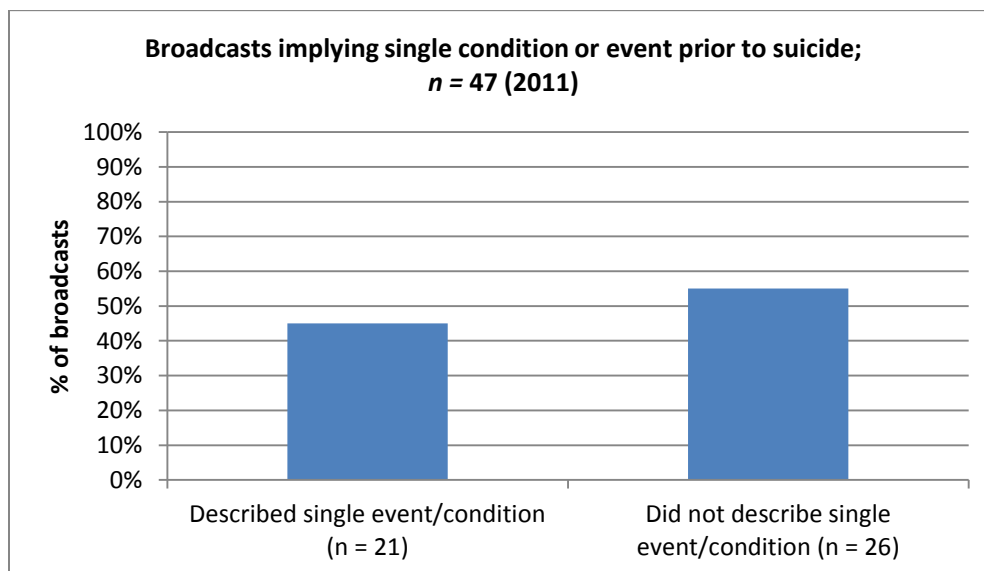
Newspaper articles

20% ($n = 32$) of newspaper articles indicated or implied that a single event or condition had preceded the suicide death or attempt.



Television broadcasts

45% ($n = 21$) of broadcast stories described a single preceding condition or event prior to the suicide death or attempt.



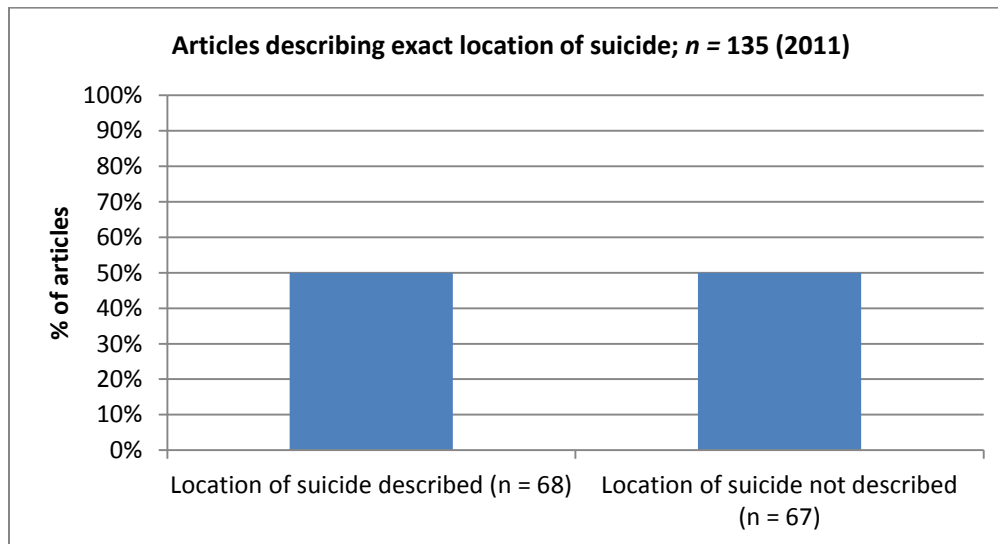
Location of suicide

More than half of the total news items provided information about the exact location where the suicide death or attempt took place. The Recommendations discourage identifying specific locations.

“Exact location” included cross streets, precise street addresses or named public places (i.e., train station, public park) where the suicide occurred.

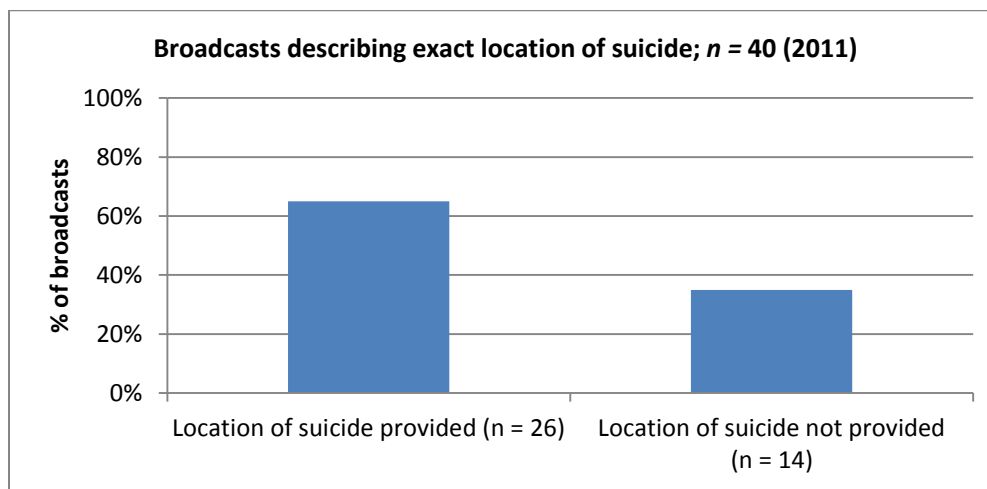
Newspaper articles

50% ($n = 68$) of the 135 newspaper articles about a suicide or suicide attempt described the exact location of the event.



Television broadcasts

65% ($n = 26$) of the 40 broadcasts that covered a suicide or suicide attempt, mentioned the exact location of the suicide.

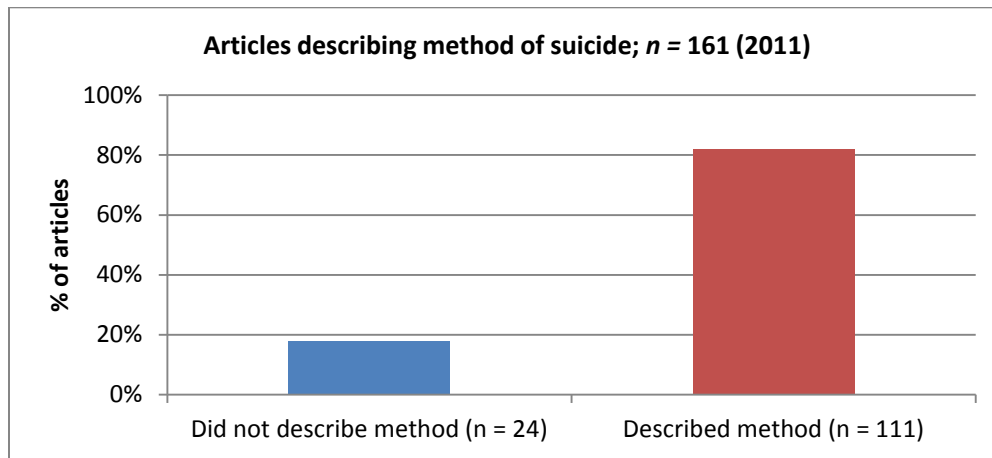


Suicide method

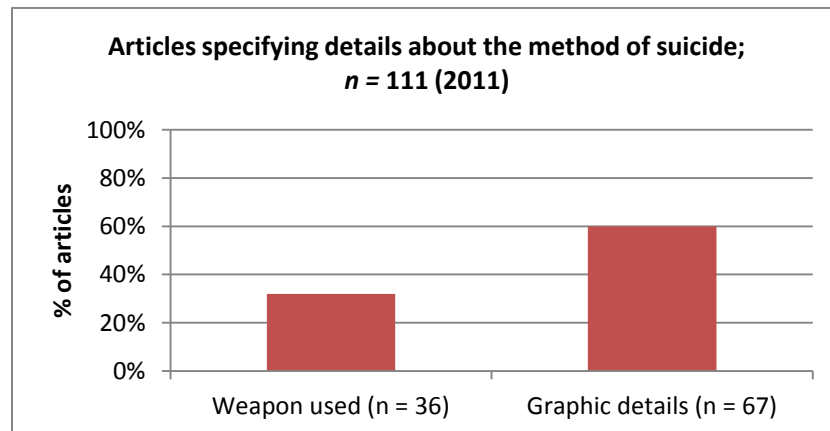
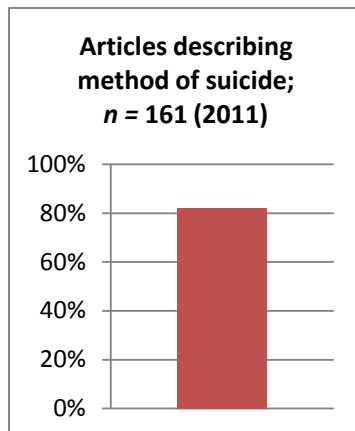
The majority of coverage mentioned the suicide method, including details about the weapon used and other graphic details such as the sequence of events leading up to the suicide. The Recommendations strongly discourage providing information that could be copied or emulated by a vulnerable person.

Newspaper articles

82% ($n = 111$) of the 135 newspaper articles about a suicide mentioned the method of suicide.



Of the 111 articles that mentioned the method of suicide
32% ($n = 36$) mentioned the weapon used in the suicide⁷
60% ($n = 67$) provided graphic details about the suicide⁸

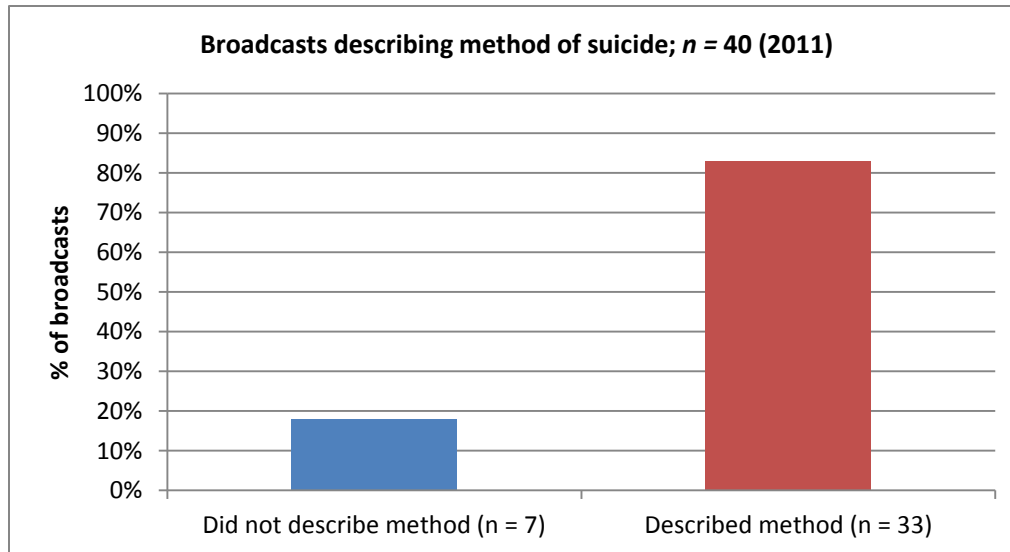


⁷ For example, the news item mentioned the type of firearm used in a shooting death, or the type of rope or cord used in a hanging.

⁸ "Graphic details" could include site on the body where the person had fatally harmed themselves, or the sequence of events leading up to the person's suicide.

Television broadcasts

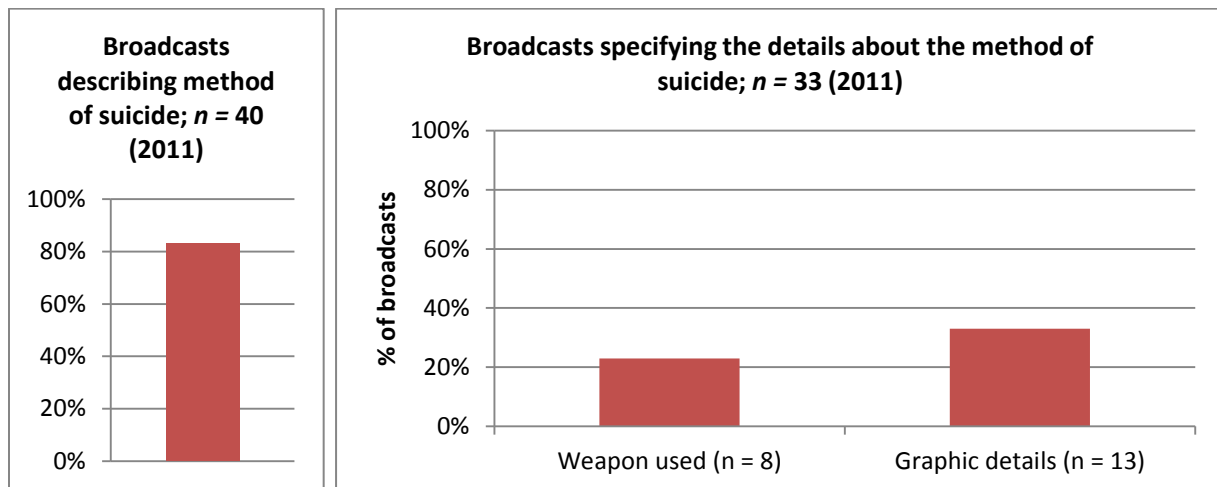
83% ($n = 33$) of the 40 broadcasts that covered a suicide mentioned the method of suicide.



Of the 33 broadcasts that mentioned the method of suicide:

23% ($n = 8$) described the weapon used in the suicide

33% ($n = 13$) provided graphic details about the suicide



Persons quoted

Very few news items quoted mental health professionals or suicide prevention experts. The majority of quotes came from law enforcement or community members. The Recommendations call for mental health and suicide prevention experts to be used as sources on the causes of suicide.

Newspaper articles

73% ($n = 118$) of the 161 newspaper articles quoted individuals. Among these 118 articles:

55% ($n = 65$) quoted law enforcement

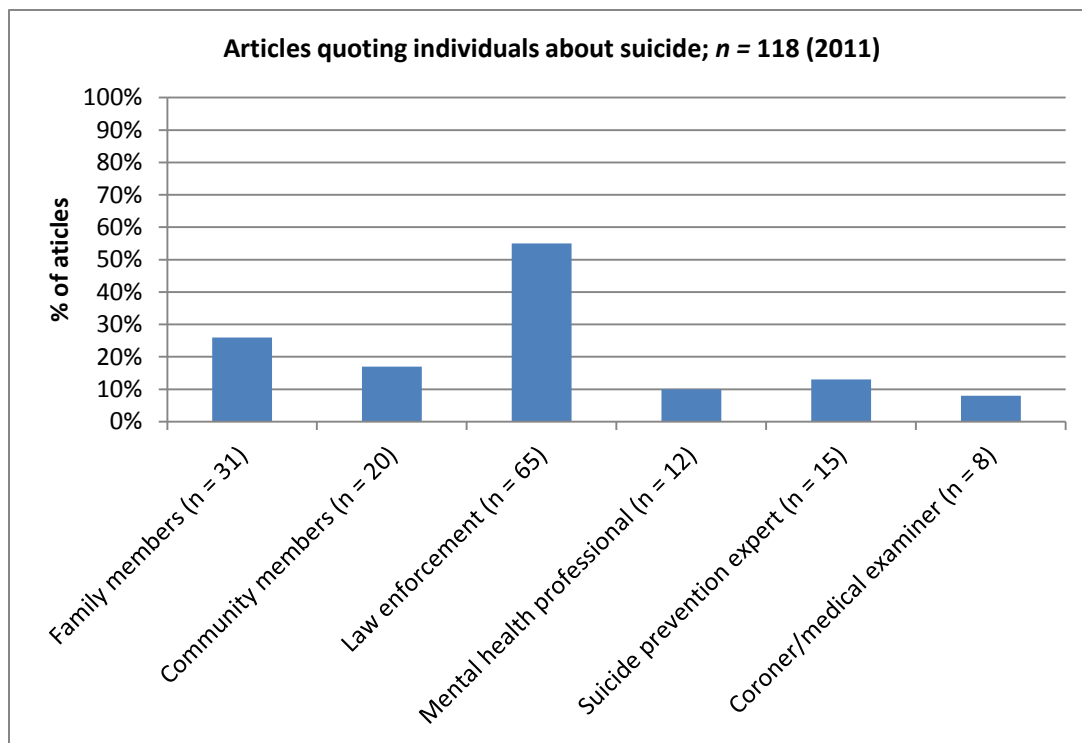
26% ($n = 31$) quoted family members of the decedent

17% ($n = 20$) quoted friends, neighbors or coworkers of the decedent

13% ($n = 15$) quoted a suicide prevention expert

10% ($n = 12$) quoted a mental health professional

8% ($n = 8$) quoted a coroner or medical examiner

*Television broadcasts*

Of the 47 broadcasts, 60% ($n = 28$) interviewed individuals in the story. Among these 28 broadcasts:

68% ($n = 19$) interviewed friends, neighbors or community members of the decedent

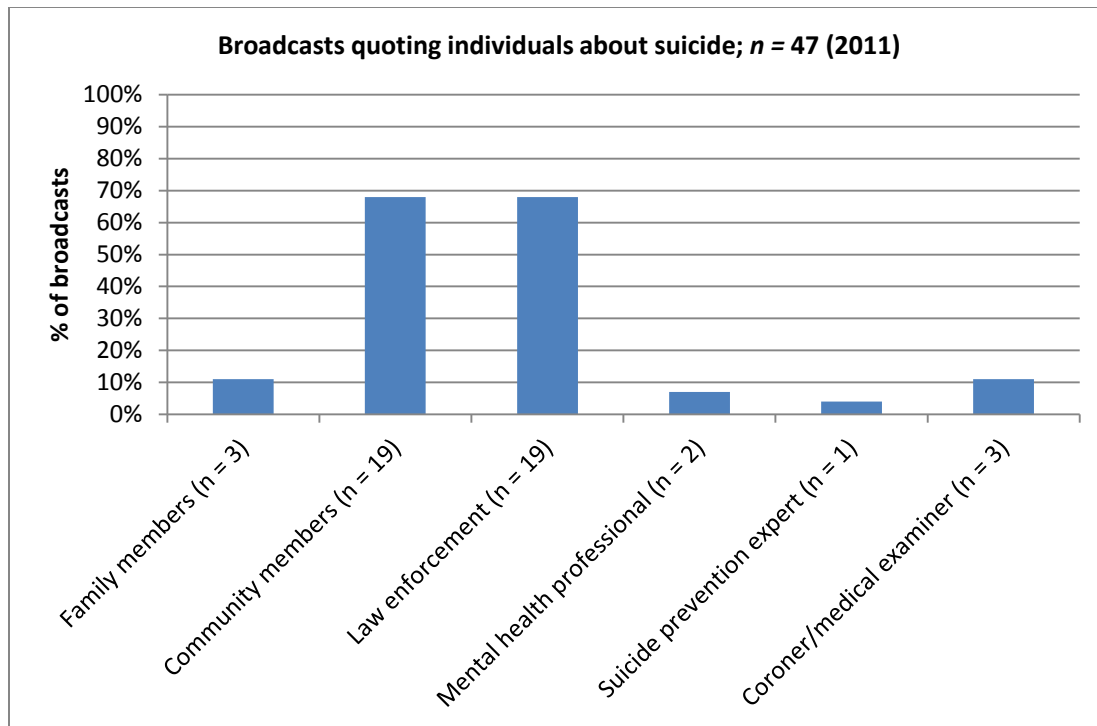
68% ($n = 19$) interviewed law enforcement

7% ($n = 2$) interviewed a mental health professional

4% ($n = 1$) interviewed a suicide prevention expert

11% ($n = 3$) interviewed family members of the decedent

11% ($n = 3$) interviewed a coroner or medical examiner

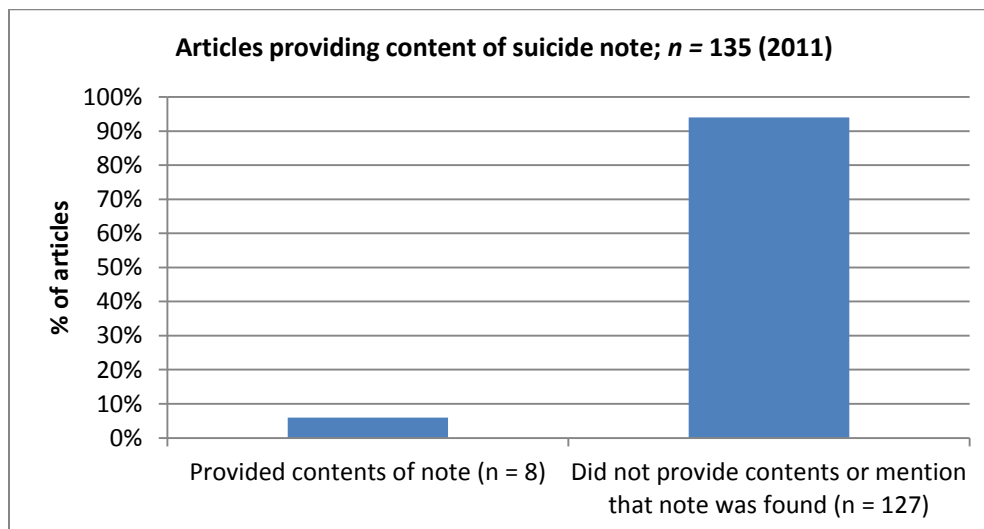


Contents of suicide notes

Very few news items provided information about a suicide note or disclosed its contents. None of the broadcasts provided information about a suicide note or its contents. The Recommendations encourage that contents of any note not be disclosed.

Newspaper articles

94% ($n = 127$) of the 135 newspaper articles that covered a suicide did not mention that a note was found or provide information about the contents of a note. 6% ($n = 8$) provided information about the contents of the suicide note.



Television broadcasts

None of the broadcasts that covered a suicide mentioned that a note was found or provided information about the contents of a note

Language used to describe suicide

Almost three quarters of newspaper articles used inappropriate language in describing suicide. Most television broadcasts avoided using either appropriate or inappropriate language.⁹ The Recommendations suggest avoiding specific inappropriate terms such as “committed suicide,” “failed attempt,” “successful” or “unsuccessful” attempt, “suicide victim,” or language pertaining to the method of suicide (i.e., “he shot himself” or “he hung himself”) and offer more appropriate substitutes (“died by suicide” or “killed him/herself”).

Newspaper articles

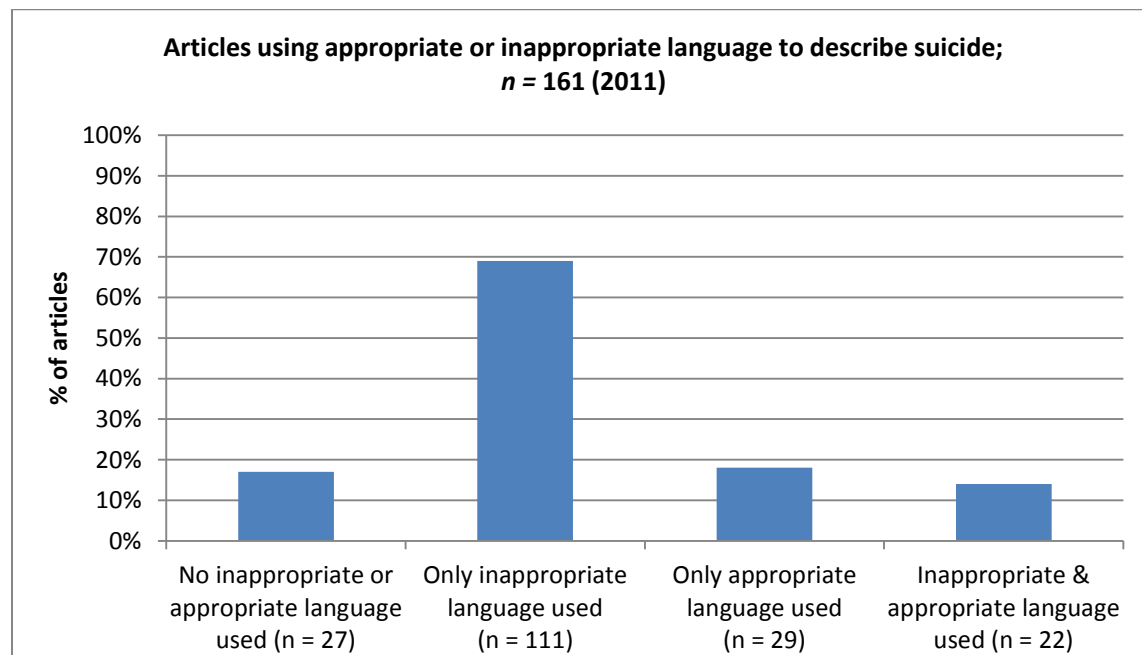
Of the 161 articles in the sample:

69% ($n = 111$) used inappropriate language

18% ($n = 29$) used appropriate terms

17% ($n = 27$) did not use any inappropriate or appropriate terms

14% ($n = 22$) used a combination of both inappropriate and appropriate terms to describe the suicide



Television broadcasts

Of the 47 stories in the sample:

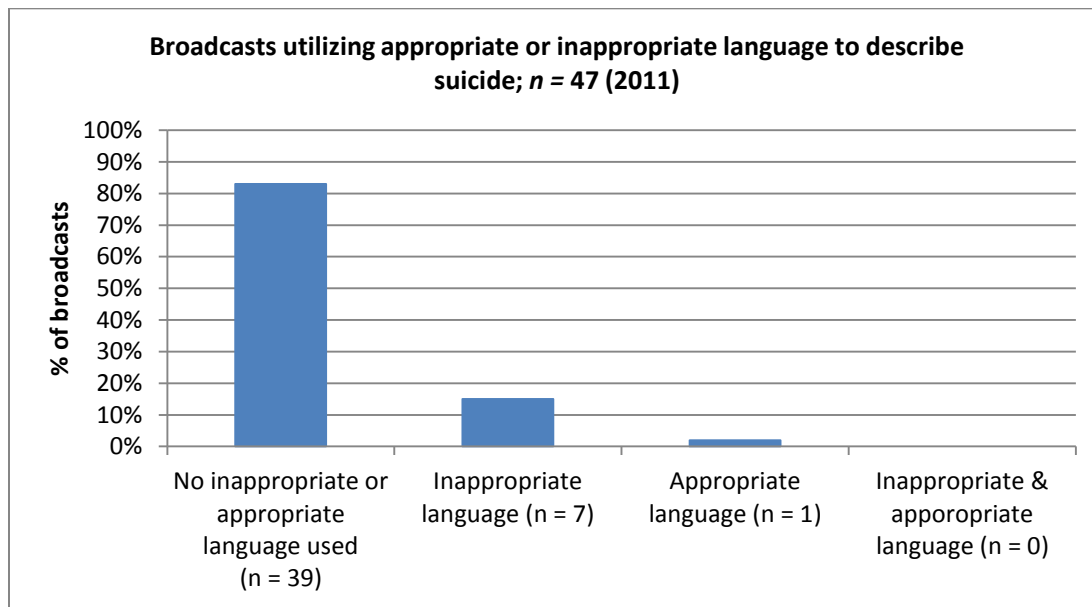
83% ($n = 39$) did not use any language considered appropriate or inappropriate

15% ($n = 7$) used inappropriate terms

2% ($n = 1$) used appropriate terms

0% used a combination of both inappropriate and appropriate language

⁹ For example, broadcasts may have stated, “The body was found this morning. Police confirmed that it was a suicide.”



Sensational language about numbers and rates of suicide

Very few reports used language that sensationalized the rates or numbers of suicide. None of the broadcast stories used sensational language to describe numbers and rates of suicide. The Recommendations discourage sensationalizing how commonly suicide occurs or implying that suicide is “skyrocketing.”

Newspaper articles

Only 2% (n = 3) of the 161 articles used sensational language to describe numbers or rates of suicide.

Television broadcasts

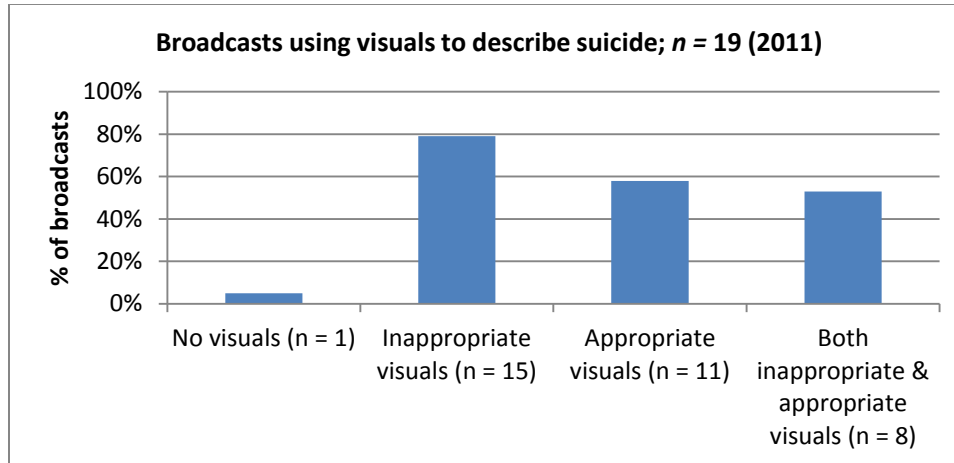
None of the broadcasts used sensational language to describe numbers or rates of suicide.

Visuals (for television broadcast analysis only)

The majority of broadcasts used inappropriate visuals when reporting on suicide. The Recommendations discourage depicting the body or location of death, as well as showing memorial sites.

This section analyzes the use of visuals (footage, graphics and images) among the 19 television broadcasts of which archived copies were purchased and viewed. Inappropriate visuals included aerial footage of the location of the suicide; showing the body of the decedent; pictures related to the method; footage of memorials; showing the exact location of the suicide; or on-scene reporting at the location of the suicide. Appropriate visuals included archived photos of the individual; graphics of resources; or on-scene reporting from a police department or health department.

Of the 19 broadcasts that were analyzed through viewing:
 79% ($n = 15$) used inappropriate visuals
 58% ($n = 11$) used appropriate visuals
 53% ($n = 8$) used a combination of inappropriate and appropriate visuals
 5% ($n = 1$) did not use any visuals



Discussion

The results of this study show that California newspaper and television coverage of suicide during the last six months of 2011 did not consistently adhere to the *Recommendations for Reporting on Suicide*. Although sensational reporting was not the usual practice, much more could be done to promote the concepts of preventability, inform the public about available resources and reduce graphic coverage.

Strong adherence to Recommendations

Most reports strongly adhered to the Recommendations in two practices. By maintaining this level of adherence, the media can have a significant impact on how suicide is perceived in the community.

Providing contents of a suicide note

Very few news items provided information on the content of suicide notes. Providing the contents of a suicide note can spread misinformation about suicide as well as increase the risk of contagion.

Sensational language to describe rates and numbers

Almost none of the news items discussed suicide rates in a sensational manner. Suicide is often reported as being “on the rise” or as an epidemic, even when data may show declines over time. Reporting on suicide rates in this manner may not provide the public with an accurate depiction of the problem and may also increase contagion by making suicide seem commonplace.

Partial adherence to Recommendations

Most news reports frequently missed the mark in the following six practices. Improved adherence to these recommendations could decrease the possibility of contagion and convey important information about warning signs of suicide.

Coverage type

The majority of news items focused on suicide deaths and attempts without discussing suicide as a public-health or community-wide issue.

Providing information about warning signs and risk factors for suicide

More than half of the news items did not discuss any warning signs or risk factors for suicide.¹⁰ This is a missed opportunity to educate the public about how to detect signs among friends and loved ones who may be at risk for suicide.

Describing a single event or condition prior to suicide

Nearly half of the news items mentioned a single event or condition prior to the suicide. (For example, the report mentioned that an individual had recently argued with a partner, or had been bullied, giving the impression that the argument or bullying was the “reason” for the individual’s death.) Reporting in this manner does not convey the multifaceted nature of suicide and that there are many risk factors and precipitating events that may contribute to a suicide.

Describing the suicide method

The majority of news items provided too much information on the method of suicide including the location, graphic details and the weapon that was used. Sharing information about the method and the details surrounding the suicide can increase risk of contagion.

Language

The majority of newspaper articles used terms that are considered inappropriate when describing suicides. However, broadcast stories tended to refrain from using either inappropriate or appropriate language.

Visuals

Broadcast news stories frequently provided overly graphic information about the suicide. The majority of broadcasts provided footage of the location of the suicide, with some broadcasts reporting on-scene from the location. Graphic visuals, paired with information about suicide method, can increase contagion.

Lack of adherence to Recommendations

News media frequently missed opportunities to provide helpful information for suicide prevention. Increasing adherence in these three practices can improve the belief that suicide is preventable, and the knowledge that there are resources in the community to help those who are concerned for someone or at risk for suicide themselves.

Providing suicide prevention resources

Only a handful of news items provided information about any suicide prevention resources by listing a phone number or website to refer to for help or more information. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline and local crisis numbers were the most commonly listed resources. Providing helpful resources in news items could easily be incorporated into most reports.

¹⁰ Many non-professionals confuse risk factors and warning signs. Risk factors are characteristics that make it more likely that an individual will consider, attempt or die by suicide. It does not indicate immediate risk. Warning signs indicate an immediate risk of suicide. For more information on risk factors and warning signs of suicide, please refer to www.sprc.org/sites/sprc.org/files/library/RandPPrimer.pdf

Listing information on “How to Help”

Very few news items provided information on how to help. Suggestions that were provided did not follow the Recommendations, but were more vague and informal such as “talk to the person about their feelings” or “listen to them.” Precise information about how to help, as provided in the Recommendations, can convey that suicide is preventable, and it can encourage readers or viewers to take action.

Persons quoted

Very few mental health professionals and suicide prevention experts were quoted in news items about suicide. The majority of quotes were provided by law enforcement, with a substantial portion also given by neighbors, who are not qualified to discuss causes of suicide. Law enforcement and non-professionals are also more likely to discuss suicides in a graphic manner and use inappropriate language. Quoting mental health professionals and suicide prevention experts can better ensure accurate coverage of this important public health issue, with a focus on prevention.

Conclusion

California news media showed the strongest degree of adherence to the Recommendations that *discourage* certain reporting practices, such as providing details about method or using sensational language. Very few articles or broadcasts sensationalized suicide or provided overly graphic descriptions of method. The Recommendations discourage these practices because they can increase the risk for contagion, and they provide misinformation about suicide to the community.

The lowest degree of adherence was to the Recommendations that *encourage* providing helpful resources and interviewing suicide prevention and mental health professionals as reliable sources of information. The Recommendations call for these practices because they further the message of the preventability of suicide and make the community aware of resources to help. Much more can be done to routinely provide crisis telephone numbers when reporting on suicide and to cover prevention programs and activities.

Study Limitations

The Recommendations express concern over repeated and extensive coverage, which was difficult to ascertain for this study. Although Lexis-Nexis provides the page number on which newspaper articles appeared, we could not determine whether the article had been displayed “above the fold” or how large the headline was. Access to photographs that may have been printed or displayed on a website is also not available through Lexis-Nexis. In addition, project staff could not analyze how prominently an article or broadcast story was featured on the outlets’ websites and whether additional content such as a link to a resource or a video were included to supplement the story. For television broadcasts, the number and content of “teasers” leading up to the news program could not be determined.

Next Steps

In 2012, the California Suicide Prevention Social Marketing Campaign will disseminate the national Recommendations in English and in Spanish to news outlets throughout California. Suicide prevention practitioners in every county can encourage their local journalists to adopt the Recommendations as a standard of practice. Counties will receive a guide to media advocacy to assist with this process. An analysis of California coverage will be repeated in 2014 to examine reporting during the last six months of 2013 and any changes that may result from these interventions.

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Figure 1: Newspapers in Final Sample

Newspaper	Number of Articles per Newspaper / Percentage of Total Sample (n = 161)	Designated Market Area (DMA)*
Chico Enterprise-Record	12 (7.4%)	Chico
Contra Costa Times	14 (8.6%)	San Francisco, San Jose
Daily News of Los Angeles	3 (1.9%)	Los Angeles
Desert Sun	4 (2.5%)	Palm Springs
Eureka Times Standard	5 (3.1%)	Eureka
Fresno Bee	4 (2.5%)	Fresno
Inland Valley Daily Bulletin	1 (0.6%)	Los Angeles
Long Beach Press Telegram	4 (2.5%)	Los Angeles
Los Angeles Times	10 (6.2%)	Los Angeles, San Diego
Marin Independent Journal	3 (1.9%)	San Francisco, San Jose
Merced Sun-Star	2 (1.2%)	Fresno
Modesto Bee	9 (5.6%)	Sacramento
Monterey County Herald	3 (1.9%)	Monterey
Orange County Register	4 (2.5%)	Los Angeles
Pasadena Star-News	1 (0.6%)	Los Angeles
Record Searchlight	4 (2.5%)	Chico
Riverside Press Enterprise	7 (4.34%)	Los Angeles
Sacramento Bee	4 (2.5%)	Sacramento
San Bernardino County Sun	3 (1.9%)	Los Angeles
San Diego Union Tribune	17 (10.6%)	San Diego
San Francisco Chronicle	6 (3.7%)	Sacramento, San Francisco, San Jose
San Gabriel Valley Tribune	8 (5.0%)	Los Angeles
San Jose Mercury News	9 (5.6%)	San Francisco, San Jose
The Californian	1 (0.6%)	Monterey
Vallejo Times Herald	4 (2.5%)	Sacramento, San Francisco
Ventura County Star	10 (6.2%)	Los Angeles
Visalia Times-Delta	5 (3.1%)	Fresno
Whittier Daily News	1 (0.6%)	Los Angeles

*Refer to Figure 3 for more information on counties encompassed within each DMA. No newspapers were featured in DMAs of Bakersfield, Palm Springs, Santa Barbara and Yuma.

Figure 2: Television Stations in Final Sample

Local Broadcast Station	Broadcast Affiliate	Origination	Number of Broadcasts per Station / Percentage of Total Sample (n = 47)	Designated Market Area (DMA)*
KABC	ABC	Los Angeles	3 (6.4%)	Yuma, Palm Springs, Los Angeles
KCAL	CBS	Los Angeles	2 (4.3%)	Palm Springs, Los Angeles
KCBS	CBS	San Francisco Bay Area	3 (6.4%)	Los Angeles
KFMB	CBS	San Diego	6 (12.8%)	San Diego
KGTV	ABC	San Diego	1 (2.1%)	San Diego
KHSL	CBS	Chico/Redding	2 (4.3%)	Chico
KNBC	NBC	Los Angeles	1 (2.1%)	Palm Springs, Los Angeles
KNSD	NBC	San Diego	4 (8.5%)	San Diego
KNTV	NBC	San Francisco Bay Area	6 (12.8%)	San Francisco
KPIX	CBS	San Francisco Bay Area	1 (2.1%)	San Francisco
KQCA	NBC	Stockton	1 (2.1%)	Sacramento
KSWB	FOX	San Diego	3 (6.4%)	San Diego
KTLA	ABC	Los Angeles	3 (6.4%)	Palm Springs, Los Angeles
KTTV	FOX	Los Angeles	1 (2.1%)	Los Angeles
KTVU	FOX	San Francisco Bay Area	2 (4.3%)	Monterey, San Francisco
KUSI	Independent	San Diego	5 (10.6%)	San Diego
XETV	CW	San Diego	3 (6.4%)	San Diego

*Refer to Figure 3 for more information on counties encompassed within each DMA. No broadcast samples were found in the DMAs of Bakersfield, Eureka, Fresno, Sacramento and Santa Barbara.

Figure 3: Designated Market Areas (DMAs) and Counties Covered within Each DMA

Designated Market Area (DMA)	Counties Covered within DMA
Bakersfield	Kern (West)
Chico	Trinity, Shasta, Tehama, Butte, Glenn, Modoc
Eureka	Del Norte, Humboldt
Fresno	Mariposa, Merced, Madera, Fresno, Kings, Tulare
Los Angeles	San Bernardino, Riverside, Orange, Ventura, Los Angeles, Kern (East), Inyo
Monterey	San Benito, Monterey, Santa Cruz
Palm Springs	Riverside (Central)
Sacramento	Plumas, Sierra, Nevada, Placer, Colusa, Sacramento, San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Tuolumne, Calaveras, Amador, Yolo, Sutter, Yuba, El Dorado, Solano
San Diego	San Diego
San Francisco	Mendocino, Lake, Sonoma, Napa, Marin, Contra Costa, San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Alameda
Santa Barbara	Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo
Yuma	Imperial
Counties outside California DMAs	Lassen, Alpine, Siskiyou, Mono