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## Popular PG-13 Movies Increasingly Portray Suicidal Behavior; No Difference in Highly Explicit Suicide Between R- AND PG-13-Rated Films

PHILADELPHIA — Annenberg Public Policy Center research analyzing 855 top box-office films from 1950 to 2006 shows that the portrayal of explicit and graphic suicide has tripled over that time. It also found no difference in the most explicit portrayals in films rated PG-13 versus those rated R by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) since 1985. The study, authored by Patrick E. Jamieson and Dan Romer, was published in the August 2011 issue of *Archives of Suicide Research*.

To illustrate the change in the portrayal of suicide from before the MPAA ratings system was introduced in 1968 to the present, consider the 1956 film “Rose Tattoo.” This film typifies the treatment of suicide in the plots of films before 1968. The film only includes a single verbal reference to suicide. By contrast, the PG-13 movie “The Grudge,” released in 2004, shows a man pushing himself off a high-rise balcony and his lifeless head splayed on the ground surrounded by blood.

“Our earlier work confirmed that modeling of suicide in media can increase the incidence of suicide,” noted study lead author Patrick E. Jamieson. “While we cannot

establish a causal connection here, it is interesting to note that the tripling of U.S. teen suicide since 1960 coincided with this increase in movie suicide portrayal. We know as well that exposure to movie-portrayed suicide correlates with thinking that one cannot get effective treatment for mental health problems. There is something seriously wrong with a movie ratings system that attaches a PG-13 rating to a movie containing explicit, graphic modeling of suicide.”

Prior to 1968, films produced in the U.S. were subject to a “production code” that limited the appearance of violence in films. However, with the abandonment of the code the MPAA established a ratings system (G, PG, R, X) that would help parents to determine whether film content was appropriate for their children. In 1984, the PG-13 category was added to further distinguish films in the PG (parental guidance) category that were not appropriate for children under the age of 13. Since that time, the difference between the PG-13 and R rating has eroded with regard to the appearance of violence.

Co-author Dan Romer added, “The MPAA ratings board apparently thinks that the portrayal of graphic suicide is acceptable for youth ages 13 and older. But parents should be warned about this content so they can decide for themselves whether it’s a good thing for their children to watch.”

The study defined suicidal behavior as occurring when a character had the “option of living but attempted or completed the taking of his/her life.” Instances that met this definition were further categorized according to the explicitness scale in Table 1 (see below). Instances receiving a score above 1 on the scale were regarded as “explicit.” Those that received a score of 3 or 4 were regarded as “highly explicit” portrayals of suicide.

Figure 1 presents the rising trend in average suicidal behavior explicitness in top 30 U.S. movies from 1950-2006.

Figure 2 shows that highly explicit suicide has appeared at about the same level (~13%) in PG-13 and R-rated films since the MPAA introduced the PG-13 rating (1985-2006).

**Table 1. Coding of Suicidal Behavior Explicitness per 5-minute Segment**

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<b>Suicide Explicitness Scale Value</b>	<b>Definition</b>
0	No suicide related content or only verbal references to suicide
1	No visuals of act: A body (living or dead) may be shown, or the act is entirely implied. Auditory implications of suicide without visuals, e.g., a body in a tub or bloody water but no visuals of cutting wrists; gunshot heard behind a door
2	Shows the intent, but not the act: Character prepares method (e.g., pointing gun at self, getting razor, tying rope), but no action of self-harm
3	Shows the act, but without completion (completion is unclear or unknown). Character explicitly engages in self-harm, but does not die (cutting, etc.)
4	Shows the act through completion (death): Character is seen or strongly implied to have been killed by self-injury (e.g., seen falling from a building, blood from wounds, or close-up of face or body)

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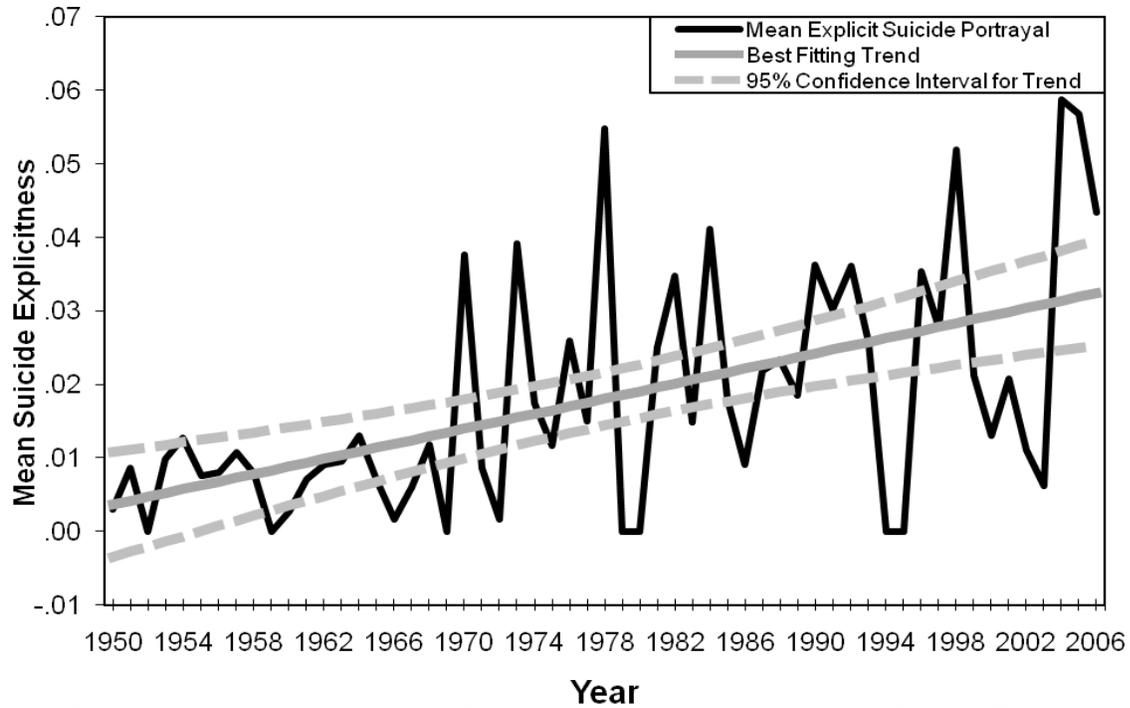


Figure 1. Suicidal Behavior Explicitness per Year with Best Fitting Trend, 1950-2006

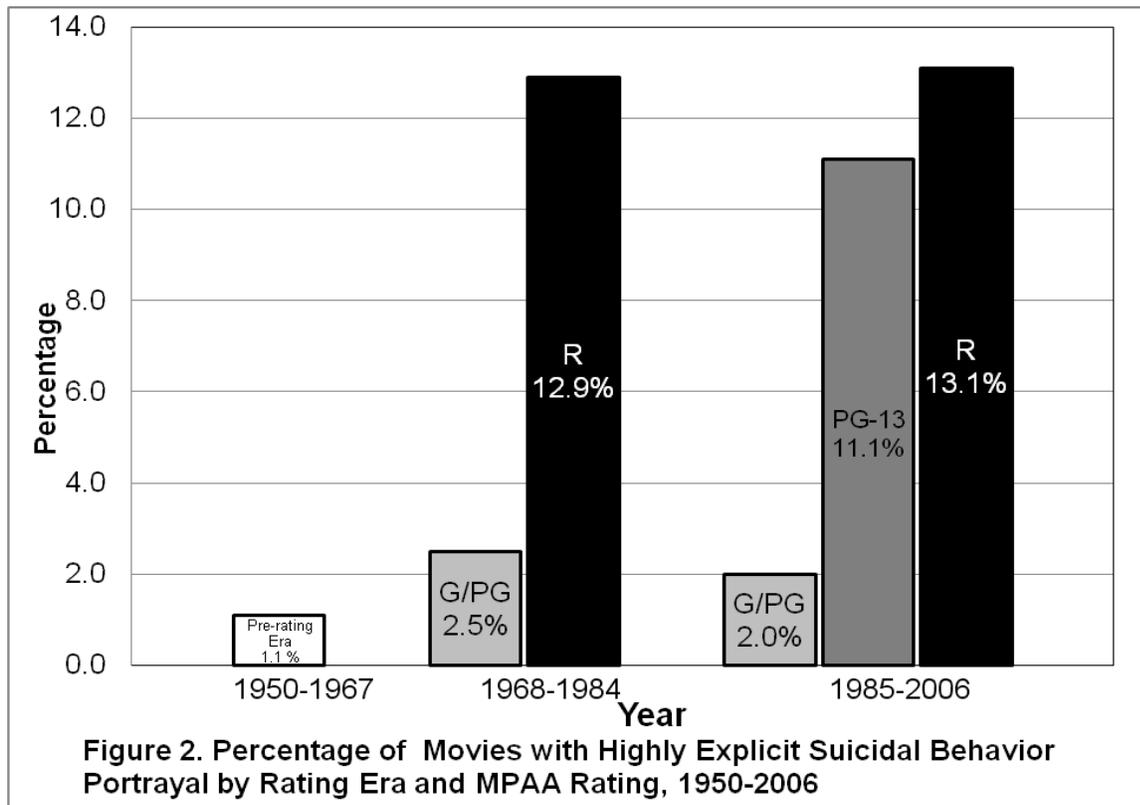


Figure 2. Percentage of Movies with Highly Explicit Suicidal Behavior Portrayal by Rating Era and MPA Rating, 1950-2006

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The Coding of Media and Health Project (CHAMP) at the Annenberg Public Policy Center (APPC) advances the scholarly community's understanding of media portrayal of risky health behaviors across time. It codes popular films, television, music, and music videos since 1950. This project explores the ways in which the mass media of the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century portrayed tobacco, alcohol, drug use, violence, suicide, and sex. The CHAMP has content analyzed more than half a century's worth of films (855 top 30-grossing movies 1950 through 2006). We are in the process of coding 2007-2010.