

Grieving After a Homicide? Families Who've Been There Share What Helped.



AN ILLUSTRATED GUIDE FROM

 The Marshall Project

Dear Reader,

If you are reading this, you may have lost someone you love to violence. Or maybe you know someone who has. You are not alone.

In St. Louis, almost 2,000 people were killed over the last ten years. Half of those cases were never solved. This is true in many places across the country.

I spoke with many families who have lost loved ones to homicide and are still waiting for justice. Many told me they felt very sad and alone. They said it was hard to find help. There were not enough places to go for support. These families want to change that.

They shared the advice they wish someone had given them when they were grieving. Some talked about how hard it was to understand the police investigation. Others said small things the police did made a big difference. They also talked about support groups that helped them feel less alone.

This guide is made from their words and wisdom. It includes help from families and trusted people in the community. Each part is here to help people who have lost someone to violence — in St. Louis or anywhere else.

You can find more information on the websites of The Marshall Project and St. Louis Public Radio. Please share this with anyone who needs it.

Thank you,
Ivy Scott

Engagement Reporter
The Marshall Project - St. Louis

Don't forget to scan
with your phone's camera
for more resources.



How Do You Grieve a Homicide?

Six people whose children or siblings were victims of homicides in St. Louis shared the advice they would give to someone grieving the sudden death of a loved one. Here's what they said helped the most — and the mistakes they wouldn't make again.

Do take as long as you need to grieve.

"You heal in spurts. I tell people, it's like a scab: What happens when the scab gets pulled off? It hurts, don't it? It may not hurt as much as the initial pain, but it still hurts, and that's the hurt that comes in waves ... It could sting you all day, or some days, it just may itch."

— Atif M.

"A lot of times people look at the time: 'Oh it's been five years.' But to us, it's been five days. It never went away, it's very fresh." — Ronda W.

Don't shy away from professional help.

"There's nothing wrong with talking to a therapist. Stop letting people tell you, 'Oh, you're crazy if you go talk to a therapist!' No, you're not. You definitely need a strong support person ... If you don't have a therapist, a counselor, a pastor who can be on the other end and give you those much-needed conversations or a listening ear, it's going to be hard for you." — Erica J.

What to Expect From a Homicide Investigation

TV crime shows often don't show how real homicide cases work. Many families told us they didn't know what police would do after their loved one was killed. They had many questions and fears.

Some families shared simple things the police did that helped them. We also talked to police and lawyers to help explain what usually happens during a homicide investigation.



The First Call to 911

When someone calls 911 to report violence (like a shooting, a stabbing or a fight), the 911 worker asks important questions. They may ask what the person who did it looked like, where it happened and what the caller saw, heard or smelled.

This is the first step in the police investigation.

Gathering Information

Police use the 911 call and try to learn more. They may look at videos from security cameras or use tools that read license plates.

This helps them find clues about what happened.

Finding Out Who the Victim Is

If the victim has a wallet or ID, police can figure out who they are quickly. If not, they may take fingerprints, ask around the neighborhood or share the news with the public to try to find out the person's name.

Telling the Family

Police often talk to the family for the first time when they are telling them about the death or asking them to identify the body. This is a very hard moment for families, but it is an important part of the case.

The Investigation Begins

Police often work fastest at the start. They are trying to learn as much as they can about the victim — who their friends were, who liked or didn't like them, who they dated.

Detectives can have many cases at once, and have to choose how to balance them. They often follow newer tips first. Even if the case is not solved right away, it can stay open for a long time. If police get a new lead — even years later — they will look into it again.

Finding a Suspect

When police think they know who did it, they try to collect evidence. They may need a warrant.

They usually talk to a judge to make sure there will be evidence to support a criminal case after the arrest.

Police usually do not share details about the suspect with the family until someone is arrested.

Making an Arrest

When police have enough proof, they arrest the suspect.

The suspect can be kept in jail for up to 48 hours before being officially charged. After that, the case goes to the court and the lawyers take over.

Going to Court

In St. Louis, it can take up to a year for a suspect to go to trial — if there is a trial at all. During that time, lawyers collect evidence, talk to people and get ready for court.

Most cases end with a plea deal. This means the accused person admits to the crime and gets a sentence without a jury trial.

Some other important things:

In Missouri, the suspect will first say “not guilty,” even if there is strong evidence. They may change their mind later and plead “guilty.”

Prosecutors work for the state of Missouri — not for the victim. They should listen to the family and help prepare them for court, but they may not share everything about the case.

At the end of the case, during sentencing, family and friends can give a statement to the judge. This is called an “impact statement.” It is often their first chance to tell the judge how this loss has affected their lives.

MORE ADVICE ON GRIEVING

Do take steps to put your life back together. It's okay if life isn't the same as before.

"You have to stop and reinvent yourself. The moment you lose that child, your life changes. You lost a piece of you. When you lose a piece of something, how do you fill that? You had a purpose, before someone was ripped out of your life. Now, how do you fill that void to find a new purpose in life? You have to rebuild yourself." — Atif M.

Don't bury or ignore your grief. And don't blame yourself.

"Don't let nobody make you feel that your loss is unimportant. Don't blame yourself. This is not your fault. Things happen. You did the best that you could as a mother, as a parent. It's not you that created the situation. Don't be afraid to say you're not okay."
— Erica J.

Do carry their legacy forward. Whether through their children, or in your family and community.

"It's especially about not letting them die. Keep them alive. Talk about them. I don't care if [others] don't want to hear you talking about them — let them leave the room — but talk about them whenever you want. Hold onto the memories."
— Sabrina E.

How Families Can Help an Investigation

We talked to people whose job it is to work on homicide cases every day, like police, lawyers and social workers. We asked how families and the community can help with a case. Here is what they said.



How You Can Help

Lisa Jones is a licensed social worker. She helps victims' families in the St. Louis County prosecutor's office. She said parents should talk to young people about going to the police if they saw something or know anything about the crime.

Information like the victim's social media names, email or recent phone numbers can really help detectives.

She also said that even if the person who died was involved in crime, that doesn't mean they deserved to be killed. Families should be honest with police, even if it's hard.

"Our families, they don't always trust law enforcement, and I get it," Jones said. "People are fearful of retaliation, but we are never going to resolve some of these cases without the community's involvement."

How to Make Sure Police Do Their Job

Heather Taylor used to work as a sergeant on the St. Louis police homicide team. She said families should hear from a detective at least once a week.

If you don't hear from them, you can call and ask. If that doesn't help, contact their boss.

"Always get a sergeant's information," she said. "Because everybody has a boss."

What You Should (and Shouldn't) Post Online

Taylor said don't try to solve the case yourself on social media.

TV shows sometimes show people doing their own detective work, but in real life, that can make things worse. It can even be dangerous.

"You'll put lives at risk, and it can lead to more crimes happening," she said, "and that's what we don't want."

Don't Try to Get Revenge

When you're hurting, you may want to get back at the person you think did it. But that only brings more pain. If you get caught, you could go to jail — and your family will lose you, too.

"Violence is what caused this person's death. Violence is not gonna bring this person back," said Jones. "It'll only add more violence, and our community is at an epidemic proportion of violence."

MORE ADVICE ON GRIEVING

Don't make sudden financial decisions.

"Sometimes people make bad decisions in traumatic situations that can cost them because of what we in the gun-violence community call 'vultures' to your pain. There's going to be a lot of people that will come in your midst while you're in turmoil and going through a traumatic situation, [who] mean you no good. So, I would not make any hurry-up decisions. I wouldn't make any financial decisions. I would pull back, go through the agony, go through the grief." — Atif M.

Do seek support from people who have been in your shoes.

"When you lose somebody, it seems like your whole life just stopped. [But] there's some help out there: support groups and people that really care, resources where people wouldn't mind if that's all you talked about for the next six months. Somewhere to go, people to meet up with, and just express how you feel. Because it's a lot of anger, a lot of things that hurt, and you just want people to know, 'Hey, I'm hurting inside. I need help. Somebody help me.'" — Monthane M-J.

Don't give up.

"No matter how deep that ditch is, or that hole of despair, or that dark place, keep going. If you gotta crawl, keep going. Don't just lay there." — Maria M.

Free Grief and Trauma Support in St. Louis

This is a list of support groups and counseling services for adults and children in the St. Louis area. These services are free for families.

The list is not complete, but it includes groups that were recommended by families who lost a child or sibling to violence. They shared these names because they used the services themselves, or know someone who did.

The Marshall Project – St. Louis checked with each group to make sure the information is up to date as of August 2025.

Crime Victims Center

Free counseling for ages 6 and up who are affected by crime

Services:

- Individual, family, couples or group counseling
- In-person or virtual

You can get up to three sessions right away, even if there's a waitlist.

Contact information:

Call: (314) 652-3623

Press two leave your number and the best time to call back

Email Peggy Tyson for adults:
peggy@supportvictims.org

Email Kat Cocivera for children and families:
kate@supportvictims.org

STL Mothers in Charge

Support for women after losing a loved one

Services:

- Grief support
- Help with rent, food, and other needs

Contact information:

Email: valariedent@gmail.com

Call: (314) 524-9805

More resources on the
back page →





This guide was compiled and written by **Ivy Scott** in August 2025 for The Marshall Project - St. Louis.

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Annie's Hope - The Center for Grieving Kids

Free support for grieving kids, teens, and their families

Services:

- Eight-week support groups (weekday evenings)
- Summer camps and retreats

Contact information:

Call: (314) 965-5015

General email:

Kidsgrieffmatters@AnniesHope.org

Program Director Kaitlyn Paton:

KaitlynP@AnniesHope.org

Chosen for Change

Peer support groups for grieving families

Groups:

- Chosen Fathers: for men
- Mothers of an Angel: for women
- COPES: for children
- Cookies n' Convo: therapy groups or 1-on-1 sessions

Contact information:

General email:

chosenforchangeorg@gmail.com

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