

GUN VIOLENCE IN MISSOURI

Missouri saw deadliest year ever for gun violence in 2020, made worse by pandemic

BY KAITLIN WASHBURN AND HUMERA LODHI

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With historic levels of gun violence in Missouri's three largest cities, the state likely experienced its deadliest year on record in 2020, experts say. BY NEIL NAKAHODO

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Missouri Gun Violence Project

The Missouri Gun Violence Project is a two-year, statewide journalism effort supported by the nonprofits Report for America and the Missouri Foundation for Health. The Star has partnered with the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, the Springfield News-Leader, and the Missouri Independent.

EXPAND ALL

A Kansas City photographer who proudly documented first steps and graduations. A St. Louis high school freshman who loved to dance. A police officer killed while responding to a mass shooting at a Springfield gas station.

They were among 689 people shot and killed in Missouri in 2020, a year that will likely be recorded as the state's deadliest ever for gun violence.

The historic level of homicides was driven by the state's two largest cities, with 266 gun homicides in St. Louis and [161 in Kansas City](#). Both cities have for years ranked high among U.S. cities for gun violence. But Springfield, the state's third-largest city, saw its fatal shootings more than double, with 23.

By the end of the year, Missouri had the third highest per-capita rate of gun deaths in the country, behind Louisiana and Mississippi.

“I would be shocked if it’s not also the deadliest year in Missouri’s history, we are seeing increases in three cities, how is it not possible for this to be the deadliest year,” said [Ken Novak](#), a criminology professor at the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

To understand the full scope of gun violence across the state, The Star interviewed experts, gathered information about dozens of shooting victims from families and obituaries, and analyzed data from police and the [Gun Violence Archive](#), a nonprofit that tracks gun incidents across the country. Because no complete official record exists, the numbers are preliminary, sourced from thousands of media outlets and public agencies.

VICTIMS OF GUN VIOLENCE IN MISSOURI IN 2020

The Star gathered 60 profiles of shooting victims from among the hundreds killed last year. The details and photographs were collected from interviews with friends and families, obituaries and news reports from the St. Louis Post-Dispatch and the Springfield News-Leader. Click any of the squares for more information.





The effort was undertaken as a part of the [Missouri Gun Violence Project](#), a two-year, statewide solutions journalism collaboration

supported by the nonprofits [Report for America](#) and the [Missouri Foundation for Health](#).

In an extraordinary year, the people across the state grappling with violence — criminologists, health care professionals, violence interrupters, law enforcement officials — say the coronavirus pandemic's disruptions aggravated gun violence problems, putting individuals more at risk and hampering prevention efforts.

But even before the pandemic, Missouri was primed to see worse violence after more than a decade of rolling back gun restrictions and a longstanding lack of trust between police and the most at-risk communities in the state's largest cities.

The Star's analysis shows Missouri's gun violence problem has been worsening year after year. The state has long led the country with its rate of Black homicide victimization. In 2020, a large majority of victims were Black men, making up [61% of Kansas City's](#) homicide victims and [78% for St. Louis](#), according to police data.

The year's gun violence was defined by a dramatic spike in the summer, far exceeding the usual increase in warmer months. The summer also saw historic protests against police brutality and inequalities in the U.S. justice system.

In late June, after widespread outrage over the fatal shooting of a 4-year-old asleep in bed in Kansas City, the Trump administration named a federal anti-crime crackdown after the child. [Operation LeGend](#) put Kansas City in a national spotlight for gun violence, and federal law enforcement carried it to St. Louis and other cities across the country

[Kansas City Mayor Quinton Lucas](#) wrote to Missouri Gov. Mike Parson in July requesting a special session of the state legislature to address violent crime, saying in the letter, "no issue has presented a greater

challenge to my city than the epidemic of violent crime, particularly gun violence, on the streets of Kansas City.”

Parson called a special session on violent crime later in the summer, but [only succeeded in passing two](#) of the six bills he sought: one creating a witness protection fund and another removing a requirement that St. Louis police live within the city limits.

In a phone interview Thursday, Kelli Jones, the communications director for the governor’s office, said she didn’t understand the focus on gun violence.

“We put a lot of energy and a lot of effort into the violent crime in all the major cities across the state from the very beginning of his administration and we made some great progress so I think just to blame the guns, that’s just the tip of the iceberg,” Jones said.

In a written statement sent Friday, Parson said he knows Missouri has a serious problem with violent crime.

“We are committed to doing everything we can at the state level to fight violent crime, but we can’t do it alone. The only way we can truly make a difference is by working together,” Parson said.

“We must do our jobs. We must support our law enforcement officers, and we must start prioritizing the prevention of violent crime.”

As for Operation LeGend, [it effectively ended in September](#) with the departure of all the federal agents sent to Kansas City.

The operation joined previous anti-crime efforts, such as the [once-promising KC NoVA program](#) ended by Kansas City police leaders, that were touted and then discarded by law enforcement officials.

Meanwhile, gun violence problems in Kansas City and across the state have only grown worse.

“A lot of these [gun violence initiatives] come off to a really hot start, and we do a big press conference and over time, the different entities, whoever that may be ... they frankly start to lose interest or focus,” said Capt. David Jackson, a public information officer with the Kansas City Police Department.

Jackson also said [Reform Project KC](#), a new city effort against violent crime announced by Mayor Lucas in September, shows promise.

Real solutions require more than policing, experts say. In Missouri, anti-violence workers in urban neighborhoods and university criminologists [agree the underlying causes of violence are out of law enforcement's control](#).

In November, [John Jay College of Criminal Justice](#) in New York published recommendations for reducing violence without police, which include funding anti-violence efforts and providing social services and opportunities.

Medical workers and gun safety advocates say solutions to gun violence will require investing in public health approaches and violence prevention work.

While it's clear Missouri experienced record-breaking gun violence, we still don't know exactly how many people died from guns in 2020. No state or federal government agency publishes total numbers of gun suicides and gun homicides for Missouri during the year.

Criminologists and health care professionals say this lack of transparency conceals the actual toll of gun violence and makes it harder to save lives in the future.

“We need to make a massive investment in social services and address inequalities and meet people’s basic needs,” said Dr. Kristen Mueller, an emergency room doctor and co-director of emergency medicine research at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis.

Mueller, who is also involved with the Gun Violence Initiative in St. Louis, an effort championing public health solutions, said the pandemic has brought the importance of public health to the forefront. More people, she said, are willing to fund and support public health initiatives.

“Curbing gun violence requires an integrated attack of the problem, like with COVID. These deaths and injuries are not inevitable, they are preventable.”

'A RUNNING START'

Within 15 minutes of ringing in the New Year, St. Louis saw its first two homicides of 2020, in a double shooting.

Soon after, a third homicide victim was found a block away in the Benton Park neighborhood. Two more people were shot and killed within hours, and St. Louis Police Chief John Hayden [told the St. Louis Post-Dispatch](#) it was the most violent New Year's Day in recent memory.

The city, which in recent years [has led the nation](#) in murders per capita, went on to record one of its deadliest years ever.

The escalating violence continued later that month in Kansas City, when a man [opened fire on a line of people](#) waiting outside the 9ine Ultra Lounge nightclub, leaving a woman dead and 15 people injured before he himself was shot and killed by a security guard. The woman who was killed, [Raeven Parks](#), left behind a 7-year-old daughter.

Jackson County Prosecutor Jean Peters Baker later said [the shooter could have gone to prison years earlier](#) on a charge of unlawful use of a weapon, but changes in Missouri's gun law in 2016 helped him remain free. Prosecutors had dropped the charge after state lawmakers approved a law that allows concealed weapons to be carried without a permit.

Kansas City would go on [to surpass its historic homicide record](#) of 155, set in 2017.

Other U.S. cities — [Detroit, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia](#) — also experienced spikes in gun violence in recent months. But Missouri's two largest cities had a running start heading into 2020, criminologists say, with gun violence ramping up to historic levels year after year.

“So both Kansas City and St. Louis entered the current period poised for a continued increase in violence this year, unlike other cities,” said Richard Rosenfeld, a criminology professor and researcher at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. “A longstanding crime drop has been overturned, and that is not the case in other cities.”

Part of the reason for the steady increase in gun violence is the rollbacks of firearm regulation in the state, said Michael Sean Spence, community safety initiatives director at Everytown for Gun Safety.

“Missouri has among the weakest gun laws, no background checks, permitless concealed carry, domestic abusers can have and keep guns and there’s no prevention to keep children from accessing guns,” Spence said.

Missouri removed its permit-to-purchase requirement in 2007. Since then, the state saw a 16% increase in firearm suicide and a 25% increase

in firearm homicide, according to a [study by the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Policy and Research](#).

In 2016, state lawmakers did away with concealed carry permitting and passed a stand-your-ground law. The National Rifle Association declared victory in Missouri for gun rights.

During the 2020 election cycle, [guns were hardly an issue in the state](#) — both gun rights and gun control groups donated scant funds to Missouri campaigns.

Jackson, the Kansas City police spokesman, said it's easy for just about anyone to have and carry a gun in Missouri.

“The department has been very vocal about how the availability of guns leads to gun problems, which we see now,” he said.

BEHIND OUR REPORTING

This story is part of a two-year, statewide journalism project investigating the causes, consequences and solutions to gun violence in Missouri. The Star launched the project in partnership with the nonprofits Report for America and Missouri Foundation for Health, which are helping to fund three reporters devoted to the effort. The St. Louis Post-Dispatch and the Springfield News-Leader are also partners in the project.

PANDEMIC AND GUN VIOLENCE

In late March, a man went on a shooting rampage spanning miles across Springfield before he crashed his vehicle at a Kum & Go gas station and killed four people before dying by suicide.

Police officer Christopher Walsh, fatally shot while responding to the scene, was the first Springfield officer killed in the line of duty since 1932.

By itself, the carnage at the gas station accounted for a third of Springfield's uptick in homicides in 2020. The city saw its killings more than double, from 11 in 2019 to 23 in 2020. The mass shooting, [one of only two in the U.S.](#) in 2020, came as parts of the state were shut down to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

Starting in March, the pandemic caused major disruptions that exacerbated gun violence and weakened prevention efforts, public health workers said. Lockdowns and an economic recession had tensions running high as stress and uncertainty spread through communities.

Gun purchases in Missouri increased dramatically during the pandemic. In June, over 77,000 guns were sold in the state, the most in a month since 2000, according to [data maintained by The Trace, a nonprofit news organization.](#)

[Researchers at the University of California, Davis](#) identified a link between increasing gun sales and increased rates of gun injuries and deaths.

Their research found that people were seeking protection for themselves amid the uncertainty of the pandemic and the potential for lawlessness. Many of those identified were also first-time gun owners who might not know how to handle a weapon or properly store it.

In Kansas City, Dr. Marvia Jones, violence prevention and policy manager at the city health department, has been working closely with violence interrupters and community workers as they grapple with both rising homicides and the effects of the pandemic.

Jones said one reason gun violence spiked is higher unemployment rates.

In April, unemployment rates in [Kansas City](#) and [St. Louis](#) hit 11%, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

“Unemployment has skyrocketed, and we know that from the trend of high unemployment, disadvantaged communities tend to hurt more,” Jones said. “And a lot of the job loss happened in the service and retail industries, and people who work in those industries are in a lower socioeconomic bracket.”

Jones has spoken with families in which children have been raised by their grandparents and rely on them for structure and support.

“And many of those people died from COVID this year, so many people, young men especially, lost their person who was that stabilizing force in their life,” Jones said.

By summer, in Kansas City and St. Louis, homicides started occurring nearly every day.

In Springfield, Jean Knapp, a volunteer with gun safety nonprofit Moms Demand Action, wanted to draw attention to the number of Missouri children who've been killed by gun violence in 2020.

But she needed to make something safe amid the pandemic. She decided to set up a traveling memorial, an installation showing one small T-shirt for each child, in sizes meant to fit the babies, toddlers and teens they represent.

Knapp said even though the majority of these deaths are happening in St. Louis and Kansas City, every Missourian should care.

Year after year, gun violence in all forms, including homicides, suicides and accidents, is a leading cause of death for kids and teens in Missouri, according to [Everytown for Gun Safety](#).

"I focused on homicide to draw attention to our youngest and dearest victims of gun violence in Missouri," Knapp said. "Seeing these shirts really brings home how vulnerable they are to violence."

She added the 46th shirt to the collection for a 23-month-old who was shot and killed on Christmas Day in St. Louis.



A traveling memorial to children killed by gun violence across Missouri in 2020 was set up in Springfield by a Moms Demand Action volunteer. The installation shows one small T-shirt for each child, in sizes meant to fit the babies, toddlers and teens they represent. *Jean Knapp, Moms Demand Action*

SUMMER OF PROTEST, LACK OF TRUST

After a Minneapolis police officer killed George Floyd, sparking widespread outrage, a wave of protests against racism and police brutality swept the nation.

The demonstrations had an indirect effect on the summer's surge in violence in some cities, including in Missouri, criminology experts said. The demonstrations themselves didn't cause gun violence, but the attention on police brutality and misconduct further sapped trust in police that was already lacking, especially in communities of color.

On May 31, after one of the protests in Kansas City where dozens of police officers faced off against demonstrators, local photographer [Marvin Francois](#), was shot and killed in a robbery while picking up his son. Francois, a 50-year-old father of four, was documenting the local

protests and had taught his children the importance of standing up for what's right, family and friends said.

Seven months later, no arrest has been made in his death.

The lack of arrests in homicides has been a stubborn problem for Kansas City and St. Louis. As of September, the clearance rate for homicides during the year in St. Louis was 24%, according to the [Post-Dispatch](#). Kansas City's clearance rate for homicides that occurred in 2020 was about 43% as of August.

The failure to solve shootings was one problem cited by [Kansas City residents who told The Star](#) last summer they didn't trust police.

Community members said the police had created an environment of fear in Black neighborhoods that erodes public safety, thus driving more gun violence.

Similar problems plague St. Louis and other major U.S. cities, said Rosenfeld, the criminologist.

"Communities hit hardest by both police violence and community violence have seen a reduction of police legitimacy and trust. When people lose whatever faith they had in police, that increases crime."

Nationally, [A Gallup poll found](#) the public's faith in law enforcement plummeted to a record low of 48%, the first time survey results fell below the majority.

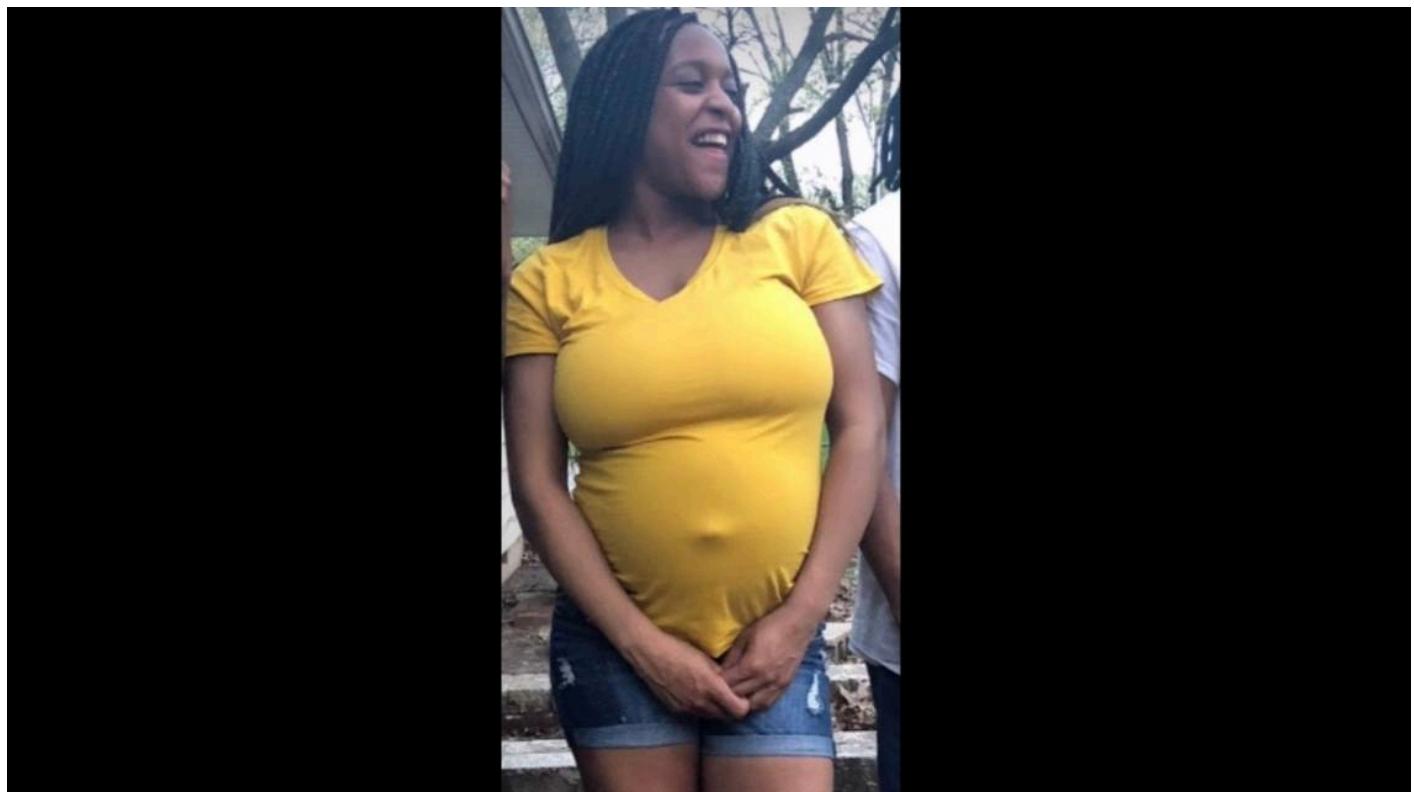
Across Missouri, the violence only grew worse through the summer.

In July, Diamon Eichelburger, a 20-year-old mother, was shot while pushing her daughter in a stroller on Van Brunt Boulevard in Kansas City, on their way to a doctor's appointment.

The killing was the 110th homicide in Kansas City for 2020, according to [data maintained by The Star](#). By that time the year before, there had

been 79 killings.

Eichelburger, four months pregnant with her second child, was hoping for a boy. Only after she died was it revealed she would have gotten her wish.



Diamon Eichelburger was shot and killed while pushing her daughter in a stroller outside a Kansas City convenience store in July 2020. Her killing was among a record number of homicides in the city in 2020. *Erica Mosby*

CURE VIOLENCE

On September 21, Rashid Junaid rushed to the 2900 block of East 33rd Street, where Tyron Payton, a 1-year-old boy, was shot and killed while riding in a car with his mom and dad. The parents were also shot but survived.

Junaid was already growing exhausted, running from shooting scene to shooting scene through his work with Aim4Peace, a Kansas City-based violence prevention organization.

Part of his job is to show up immediately to provide services to the survivors and grieving families.

At that point, Tyron was [the ninth child shot and killed](#) during the year in Kansas City.

“That stirs up a lot, showing up at a scene and knowing that it’s a baby,” Junaid said. “They don’t even have a stretcher for babies, or even body bags. This level of violence is not for them, they don’t know this evil.”

Aim4Peace intervenes with shooting survivors at hospitals to prevent retaliation, but for the first few months of the pandemic those efforts completely stopped as hospitals dealt with the onslaught of COVID patients.

The effort came to Kansas City in 2008, based on practices developed by Cure Violence, an organization that helps set up violence interruption programs across the U.S. and around the world. The strategy is meant to curb interpersonal violence through conflict mediation, case management and mental health resources.

The Cure Violence approach treats violence like a virus that spreads through communities and infects people who are exposed. As when someone contracts a virus and develops a cough and a fever, a person who witnesses violence is at risk of adopting violent behavior themselves.

The Cure Violence model has led to measurable success in other cities.

In New York City, [Save Our Streets](#) spent a year and a half using the approach in the Crown Heights neighborhood. That led to a 20% reduction in shootings.

[CeaseFire-Chicago](#) applied the model to seven of the city’s neighborhoods for a period of nearly 17 years and saw 16% to 28% reductions in shootings across the area.

Charles Ransford, senior director of science and policy at Cure Violence, has been involved with bringing the violence prevention model to St. Louis.

In 2019, the [St. Louis Board of Aldermen earmarked \\$7 million](#) to fund Cure Violence centers in only three high-violence neighborhoods for three years.

Those three neighborhoods accounted for about 28% of the city's homicides in 2019, but made up just 10% of the population, [the Post-Dispatch reported last year](#).

For the Cure Violence approach to be successful in Missouri, Ransford said, it takes a system of violence prevention that involves schools, hospitals, the business community, law enforcement, mental health services and trauma resources.

In Kansas City, Junaid said the majority of Aim4Peace's funding comes from federal grants. Without those funds, the anti-violence group is at risk of becoming a skeleton.

"We mostly rely on federal government funding, the city throws a few hundred thousand over here and they feel like they're doing something, but the police department gets millions," Junaid said.

"We've tried every police tactic we could for decades, but they've not come up with a way to stop violence," Ransford said. "Not that there isn't a role for police, but looking at the problem violence, policing alone is not the answer. Policing is the last resort after the violence has taken place."

GRIEVING CONTINUES

In the new year, criminologists Novak and Rosenfeld said, it's likely gun violence will fall back to pre-2020 levels in Missouri.

The current pace of shootings and killings, they said, is not sustainable.

“But if not breaking this year’s records is a success in 2021, then it’s sadder than I thought,” Novak said.

While researchers study the increase in homicides during the pandemic year, the number of gun suicides is likely to be even larger. In past years they have increased from 487 in 2010 to 726 in 2018.

But the number of gun suicides in 2020 is likely to remain unknown for months because no data is available.

As of December, the most recent data on gun deaths available from Missouri’s Department of Health and Senior Services dated to 2018. The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released 2019 data late in 2020 but said the numbers were not reliable.

Missouri data for 2020 may not be available till late 2021 or after.

“We get employment estimates month to month, but we have to wait nine months into the next year to see how many people we’ve killed,” Novak said.

“KCPD and St. Louis PD should be commended for putting out their homicides daily, but on a larger scale nationally, we are behind and that speaks volumes to our values.”

In St. Louis, the Gun Violence Initiative was formed, in part, to address the lack of access to recent and relevant data. As a part of the initiative, the four level-one trauma centers in the St. Louis area now share data on the firearm injuries that arrive in their emergency rooms.

The collaboration is the only one of its kind in the state.

Studies from past years show the suffering is not felt equally across Missouri.

For a decade, the state has had either the first or second highest rate of Black homicide victimization in the country, according to the Violence Policy Center.

Black people in Missouri are 14 times more likely than white people to die by gun homicide, according to research from Everytown for Gun Safety. When including suicide, Black Missourians are three times more likely to die from guns.

Meanwhile, for the loved ones of those who were killed in 2020, much of their grieving had to be done in solitude.

Only immediate family gathered outside a Kansas City funeral home in July to mourn Eichelburger, the pregnant mother shot and killed while pushing her daughter in her stroller.

“Our family is small. So to lose her so young, so suddenly and so tragically is devastating to us,” said Erica Mosby, Eichelburger’s aunt. “Any little thing sparks a memory of her. A scent, a meal, a photo, a movie, every birthday, holiday or regular day without her presence.”



Diamon Eichelburger, pictured with her 1-year-old daughter, Belle, was shot and killed outside a Kansas City 7-Eleven in July 2020. Her killing was among a record number of homicides in the city in 2020. *Erica Mosby*

Eichelburger is painfully missed, especially after what would have been her 21st birthday in October and the first holiday season her family celebrated without her.

Mosby continues to hope justice will be served. So far, prosecutors have charged only the driver of the car from which the fatal shots were fired. The shooter remains unknown.

Mosby has been caring for Eichelburger's 1-year-old daughter, Belle. She started a [GoFundMe](#) for Belle, and her goal was to raise a couple hundred dollars. People donated more than \$13,000.

“You see this everyday on the news and never think that it will happen to your family,” Mosby said.

“At this rate, you either know someone that has lost someone or your family has been struck directly.”

Star reporters Jelani Gibson, Anna Spoerre, Luke Nozicka, Katie Moore, Katie Bernard and Cortlynn Stark contributed to this report.

BEHIND OUR REPORTING

More coverage is coming in 2021 as part of the Missouri Gun Violence Project. Upcoming stories will examine public health perspectives and solutions to gun violence problems, and the issue of gun suicides in Missouri. Story tips or issues we should cover in 2021? Send email to gunviolence@kcstar.com. As part of this project, The Star will seek the community's help. To contribute, visit Report for America online at reportforamerica.org.

This story was originally published January 3, 2021, 5:00 AM.

CORRECTION: *An earlier version of this story incorrectly described the location where a St. Louis woman was shot and killed. The profile for Maria Lucas has been updated to show she was shot Sept. 14 at a community center. Also, an earlier version of the story should not have compared 2020 homicide clearance statistics in Kansas City and St. Louis with a national average that included solved homicides from previous years. The clearance rate for Kansas City homicides for 2020 alone was about 43% as of August. St. Louis' rate for 2020 alone was 24% as of September, according to the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.*

CORRECTED JAN 5, 2021



KAITLIN WASHBURN
THE KANSAS CITY STAR
   816-226-7746

Kaitlin Washburn covers gun violence for The Star as a 2020 Report for America corps member. She is a Missouri School of Journalism graduate and was previously a reporter covering agriculture in California.



HUMERA LODHI
THE KANSAS CITY STAR
   816-234-4586

Humera Lodhi grew up in Columbia, Missouri and specializes in data-driven journalism. She earned her bachelor's degrees in statistics and journalism from the University of Missouri. She joined The Star after completing a master's degree at Columbia University and a fellowship at The Marshall Project, a journalism nonprofit focused on criminal justice issues.

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