

Overview of COVID-19 obituaries posted in the St. Louis Metro region

Preliminary outline with data

Introduction and method:

Between June 19, 2020 and March 1, 2021 I published 219 obituary summaries and user submitted memorials of people in the Greater St. Louis area (as defined by the US Office of Management and Budget¹) who died of COVID-19 or from complications of the virus. I wanted to humanize the local and human impact of COVID-19 deaths by respectfully presenting memorials with pictures of everyone who died that I could find.

User submitted memorials compromised only 18 of the 219 posts, the remainder 201 entries were summaries of obituaries that I found publicly posted online. Because of the many ways that people phrase cause of death, when there is one posted, I manually sorted through over 10,000 individual obituaries. I searched as many as thirteen funeral home websites, but my three primary sites that I visited weekly were:

1. [legacy.com](https://www.legacy.com) : The entire state of Missouri, separately for the words “COVID” and “Corona”. There are many small villages and towns in the St. Louis Metro area, and I double-checked places I was unfamiliar with.
2. [StLouisCremation.com](https://www.stlouiscremation.com) : I manually sorted through every single page since every single page has the word “COVID” on it.

¹ MISSOURI - Core Based Statistical Areas (CBSAs) and Counties, US Census Bureau. US Office of Management and Budget , 2 Dec. 2018, www2.census.gov/geo/maps/metroarea/stcbsa_pg/Feb2013/cbsa2013_MO.pdf.

3. site:riverbender.com/obits/ “covid” month year : This google site search resulted in many duplicate and irrelevant results, but it was somewhat more efficient than manually skimming each published obituary for the mention of cause of death as COVID-19.

In February 2021, I began keeping a list of the phrases about COVID-19 as the cause of death, in the order that I found them:

- as a result of complications from COVID-19
- due to complications from COVID
- due to COVID
- died from the COVID virus
- from complications of COVID-19
- lost his life after contracting the COVID-19 virus
- complications due to COVID
- passed away from COVID-19
- transitioned peacefully from COVID
- after contracting COVID
- after complications resulting from COVID
- following complications from COVID
- lost his battle against COVID
- developed COVID in November 2020 and passed due to complications
- succumbing to COVID
- after fighting COVID
- because of health issues and covid
- fought a hard battle with covid19
- lost his life after contracting the COVID-19 virus
- while recovering from severe covid
- after a short bout with covid
- after a long bout with covid
- after contracting COVID

In late July 2020, after trying to access Velma Moody’s original obituary, I realized that these sources might be changed or removed so I began making screenshots of the obituary pages I obtained information from (I believe that I retroactively made screenshots of every obituary). This is noted on the fine-print of

Legacy's Frequently Asked Questions², and it is common knowledge that websites often change and have no obligation to keep content up indefinitely.

I built a very basic WordPress website on a domain I purchased (StLouisCovidMemorial.com) and created hosting on the generous "shared hosting" plan that I already had for other projects. The theme is a custom child theme of Divi by ElegantThemes.

Relevant plugins that extend functionality on the site are:

- Advanced Custom Fields by Elliot Condon. This allowed me to add custom fields for name and any correspondence with family or private notes. I used this plugin in conjunction with Divi FilterGrid to create the sortable "grid" on the front page and other pages.
- Divi FilterGrid by DiviPlugins. This plugin can sort in "gallery format" (and others) by hidden field, category, tag, and other data. It would have been unnatural reading for memorials to be Last Name, First Name; using Divi FilterGrid I was able to sort alphabetically by last name by creating a hidden field with Advanced Custom Fields. This is a paid plugin for less than \$100.
- Gravity Forms by Gravity Forms. This widely used commercial plugin allows for easy contact form integration. I spent \$45 on a license because my original idea was to create a contact form with conditional logic ("if this then that").
- Link Library by Yannick Lefebvre. This allows for a basic "link library", which I used to cite sources on the resources page (<https://www.stlouis covid memorial.com/resources/>). At the time of building St. Louis Covid

² *Frequently Asked Questions*, Legacy, memorialwebsites.legacy.com/FAQ.aspx#TimeRemain. Accessed May 8, 2021

Memorial I was focused on posting the memorials, reasoning that citations could be reformatted at a later date.

- MailPoet 3 by MailPoet. This newsletter plugin allows for automation and customization of published “new posts” notifications (memorials in this case) to users who sign up to receive emails. As of May 8, 2021 there are 75 unique subscribers who have double opted in to get notified of newly posted memorials.

Data

I organized data that I collected using the built in WordPress categories feature. Categories included: age range, county (except Metro East deaths were grouped only as “Metro East”), month died, and the special categories of veteran deaths, educator deaths, and healthcare worker deaths.

Additionally, using the built in WordPress tag feature, I later added (and where appropriate retroactively edited) tags that included: “African American”, nursing home, branch of the military, war fought in, names of specific nursing homes, cities and townships, and “helper deaths” for those who I thought touched the world extra specially.

I added the age ranges later and retroactively, due to feedback on Twitter. The age ranges correlate with Google Analytics Dimensions³, with additions:

- I added groups 75-84, 85-94, and 94+ to better analyze “elderly” age groups at a later date.

³ “About Demographics and Interests - Analytics Help.” *About Demographics and Interests*, Google, support.google.com/analytics/answer/2799357?hl=en. Accessed May 8, 2021

- I (sadly) added the 12-17 age group for Peyton Baumgarth’s memorial. He was only 13 years old and Missouri’s youngest resident to die of COVID-19.

Data tables of Categories:

Age:

Age	Count
12-17	1
18-24	0
25-34	2
35-44	2
45-54	5
55-64	23
65-74	37
75-84	51
85-94	69
Over 94	33
Age unknown	5

Month died (full months collected are March 2020 through January 2021):

Month died	Count
March 2020	4
April 2020	51
May 2020	32
June 2020	10
July 2020	11
August 2020	17
September 2020	10
October 2020	6

Month died	Count
November 2020	25
December 2020	31
January 2021	18
February 2021	2

Counties:

County	Count
Franklin County	11
Jefferson County	4
St. Charles County	9
St. Louis City	26
St. Louis County	52
St. Louis Metro East	37

Special categories:

Category	Count
St. Louis Educators	9
Healthcare Workers	10
Veterans	48

Data from tags:

- African American deaths: 16
- World War II Veteran deaths: 8
- Educator deaths: 7
- Healthcare worker deaths: 8

Discussion and further direction

This is a preliminary draft to present what I believe is important data that I've collected for StLouisCovidMemorial.com and to demonstrate my ability to professionally present research findings.

I noticed early on that African Americans in St. Louis have higher deaths per capita than white people and higher cumulative death numbers⁴ but that their obituaries seldom mentioned cause of death. There are only 16 memorials for African Americans on St. Louis Covid Memorial, and ten of them were “reader submitted”. I found only six obituaries publicly posted of African Americans who died of COVID-19. I discussed this with Dr. Paulette Sankofa, an African American and founder of the NorthSide community nonprofit Peace Weaving Wholeness. She told me that when it comes to contagious illnesses there is a long history of blame and shame within the African American communities, additional discrimination by white people, and that culturally it's considered irrelevant (especially to the public in an obituary) because the person is viewed as transitioning out of suffering and their soul is on to better things. To get a more accurate “human” impact presentation on StLouisCovidMemorial.com and for history itself, there needs to be outreach to African American communities.

Additionally I think that more data collection, discussion, and analysis could be done on the following topics:

- Impoverished people and those who don't speak English, who are less likely to have the resources to write and post obituaries.

⁴ Prener, Christopher. *Health Disparities*, 8 May 2021, slu-opengis.github.io/covid_daily_viz/disparities.html#St_Louis. Accessed May 8, 2021

- The human impact of other health disparities that Dr. Chris Prener briefly notes and extensively illustrates with data on the Health Disparities section of Tracking Covid-19 in Missouri https://slu-opengis.github.io/covid_daily_viz/disparities.html
- The Bereavement Multiplier⁵ as it applies to small communities. See my brief discussion about an important study projecting the affects of people lost to COVID-19: <https://www.stlouiscovidmemorial.com/mourning-covid-19-deaths-in-st-louis/>

Sources:

“About Demographics and Interests - Analytics Help.” *About Demographics and Interests*, Google, support.google.com/analytics/answer/2799357?hl=en.

Accessed May 8, 2021

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⁵ Verdery, Ashton M., et al. “Tracking the Reach of COVID-19 Kin Loss with a Bereavement Multiplier Applied to the United States.” *PNAS*, National Academy of Sciences, 28 July 2020, www.pnas.org/content/117/30/17695. Accessed May 8, 2021

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