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[Law & Order: Special Victims Unit](https://www.nbc.com/nbc-insider/franchise/law-order-special-victims-unit)

# [**This Timeline of Benson and Stabler's Relationship Will Make You Emotional**](https://www.nbc.com/nbc-insider/benson-and-stabler-law-and-order-relationship-timeline?cid=soc_facebook_x_x_lawandorder_org_x_lawandorder_x_editorial_x_x&utm_source=soc&utm_medium=facebook&utm_campaign=x_x_lawandorder_org_x_lawandorder_x_editorial_x&utm_term=x)

These two partners have 23 years of history!

By [Jessica White](https://www.nbc.com/nbc-insider/authors/jessica-white)



Photo: NBC

There are standard TV police partnerships, and then there is [*Law & Order: Special Victim Unit*](https://www.nbc.com/law-and-order-special-victims-unit)'s Olivia Benson ([Mariska Hargitay](https://www.nbc.com/law-and-order-special-victims-unit/credits/character/captain-olivia-benson)) and Elliot Stabler ([Christopher Meloni](https://www.nbc.com/law-and-order-organized-crime/credits/character/det-elliot-stabler)).

The two were partners for over a decade, taking down countless heinous criminals in NYC. While many legal dramas will star a good cop and a bad cop who argue back and forth, *SVU* instead embraced two complex and flawed characters who play at the other's strengths.

Benson is vulnerable and empathetic, while Stabler is cryptic and brash, but at the end of each shift, they treat each other with respect and compassion. [Benson and Stabler](https://www.nbc.com/nbc-insider/benson-and-stabler-law-and-order-svu-moments), also known colloquially as "Bensler," have become the new schematic for well-written police partnerships. After 12 seasons of *SVU*, Meloni took a step away from *Law & Order*, which saddened many Benson and Stabler fans. However, that heartbreak was resolved a decade later when Meloni returned to the *Law & Order* franchise in [*Law & Order: Organized Crime*](https://www.nbc.com/law-and-order-organized-crime), reprising his role as Stabler and frequently crossing paths with our *SVU* leading lady.

With [23 seasons of *SVU*](https://www.nbc.com/nbc-insider/franchise/law-order-special-victims-unit) and [two seasons of *Organized Crime*](https://www.nbc.com/nbc-insider/how-to-watch-law-and-order-organized-crime-episodes), Benson and Stabler's relationship has evolved fairly dramatically throughout the years. That's why we're breaking down Benson and Stabler's relationship throughout the years, with all of its chaotic twists and turns.

## **Benson and Stabler: Meet the SVU's best detectives**

Let's start this at the very beginning in 1999. The first episode of *Law & Order: SVU* airs and fans meet Benson and Stabler. *SVU*'s first season is packed with countless great scenes between these two rockstar detectives. Benson and Stabler know how to get the villain and always find moments of connection with each other while doing so.

## **Benson and Stabler grow close fast**

When you're a fundamental cog within the SVU, balancing work and personal life can be quite challenging. Throughout the early seasons of *SVU*, Benson and Stabler grow very close, resulting in Benson opening up about her childhood. Benson is a child of rape, growing up with an alcoholic mother and an absent father. Her tough upbringing causes our *SVU* powerhouse to question if she should be a mother due to her family history, but Stabler doesn't hear it. Stabler is always there to assure Benson of her worth and does so in a touching way in this Season 6 scene.

## **Stabler reveals to Benson that his wife left him**

While Benson has a few romantic flings throughout her *SVU* run, Stabler begins the series married to Kathy, but their marriage is a rocky one due to the strain his job puts on their lives. A fan-favorite *SVU* episode takes place in Season 6 when Benson and Stabler have complete opposite stances on a rape case, with Benson taking the survivor's side. The pair argue, and throughout the deliberation, Stabler grows increasingly upset. It is later revealed that his wife has left him and that the stress of the separation is likely contributing to his vitriol. While the verdict is left unrevealed to the audience, the episode ends with Benson comforting Stabler as he approaches a potential divorce, proving that the pair will always be friends even if they disagree as partners.

## **Benson and Stabler choose each other first**

Season 7 of *SVU* is when Benson and Stabler's partnership begins to get complicated. Seven years is a long time to be anyone's coworker, and in Season 7's "Fault," the pair is forced to confront their relationship when both Stabler and Benson choose each other over the job. (Stabler chooses to help a wounded Benson rather than chasing down the culprit, and later Benson refuses to take a shot at the man while he holds Stabler hostage.) The fallout results in Benson realizing that they've chosen each other first, which makes doing their job a tad difficult. So, what does Benson do? She asks for a new partner.



## [A Complete Timeline of Olivia Benson's Romantic Relationships](https://www.nbc.com/nbc-insider/olivia-benson-romantic-history-law-and-order-svu)

## **Benson tells Stabler that their partnership is complicated**

During the fallout of Benson and Stabler's growing closeness, Benson attempts to maintain professionalism by asking for a new partner. Stabler clearly feels some type of way about this decision and decides to confront Benson head-on about her reasoning. Stabler typically keeps a cool disposition, but you can tell that he struggles with the idea of working with someone else and misses Benson dearly.

## **Benson and Stabler become partners again**

Thankfully, it's hard to keep Benson and Stabler separated for too long. While Benson and Stabler take a brief hiatus as partners, they are reunited toward the beginning of Season 8 only a few episodes later. While the moment is initially awkward for both of them, the pair fall back into their typical banter very fast.

## **Benson and Stabler are classified as "too close"**

In Season 7, we see Benson and Stabler first question their allegiance to each other and how it might affect their productivity as cops. The question comes back up in Season 8, Episode 16's "Philadelphia" when they are both analyzed by a workplace psychologist. Their captain is informed that Benson and Stabler “have a degree of mutual reliance and emotional dependence that compromises their effectiveness as police officers.” So, does their boss split them up? No dice. Even the psychiatrist explains that by separating Benson and Stabler, NYC would be losing two of its "best detectives."



## [The Sweetest Things Chris Meloni and Mariska Hargitay Have Said About Each Other](https://www.nbc.com/nbc-insider/benson-and-stabler-SVU-sweetest-quotes-about-each-other)

## **Stabler has a kid and shares his first hug with Benson**

While Stabler and Kathy are briefly separated, they hook up, which results in Kathy getting pregnant and the two getting back together. In Season 9, Benson volunteers to drive Kathy to a doctor's appointment while Stabler is out of town, which results in a life-threatening car crash and Kathy going into labor prematurely. Benson is there for Kathy the entire time, and when Stabler finally arrives at the hospital, he is very thankful to his long-time partner. The tension results in the first Bensler embrace, a rare and memorable moment for many *SVU* fans.

## **Benson and Stabler go undercover as a married couple**

Some of the best scenes in *SVU* are when Benson or Stabler go undercover for a case, as we see each of the detectives shed their skin for a moment. One of the most entertaining scenes is when Benson and Stabler are forced to go undercover as swingers to track down the culprit. The look of panic on Stabler's eyes? Iconic.

## **Stabler shockingly leaves the SVU**

*SVU* fans thought Bensler was forever, but Season 13 begins with Benson learning Stabler has left the SVU. Even worse? Stabler gave Benson no heads up; he just takes his entire life and moves to Europe. We rarely see Benson break down, but with Stabler gone, it's an understandable upset.

## **Benson mentions Stabler after being tortured**

The William Lewis plot of *SVU* is one of the most horrifying and memorable series of episodes of the show, with Benson's safety in question. After Benson is kidnapped by a serial rapist intent on torturing and killing her, she is able to escape and apprehend the culprit using an iron bar from a bed. After, Benson questions how she should proceed after the traumatic experience. “My old partner, he’d know what to do,” Benson says, referencing Stabler. “He wouldn’t question himself after what you’ve done. He would kick your teeth in, break your legs, break your arms, break your back—break your face. Maybe I should call him. Maybe I should get him to use that metal bar on you and make you beg for your life." Benson rarely brings up Stabler during his *Law & Order* hiatus, so this moment was heart-wrenching for Bensler fans everywhere.

## **Benson and Stabler are reunited**

With the launch of *Law & Order: Organized Crime*, Stabler returns to NYC to see Benson as she receives an important award. She fails to attend the ceremony because there has been a horrendous accident: Stabler's wife is mortally wounded in a car bombing intended for Stabler. A shell-shocked Stabler sets his sight on Benson for the first time in over a decade, and the scene is *powerful*.



## [Olivia Benson's Had So Many Legendary Hairstyles on Law & Order: SVU](https://www.nbc.com/nbc-insider/olivia-benson-hairstyles-by-season-law-and-order-svu)

## **Stabler apologizes to Benson for abandoning her**

Did you think Stabler was going to get away with leaving Benson without any notice after 12 years of partnership? No way! Benson and Stabler share a tense scene in the hospital after Kathy's accident where Benson tearfully asks Stabler why he left her without any heads-up. Stabler delivers a heart-wrenching apology, revealing that he didn't think he could leave if he saw Benson's face. Pass the tissues!

## **Stabler gives Benson the infamous letter**

*Organized Crime* begins with Stabler giving Benson a letter, and it left fans in an uproar. The contents of the letter are left unrevealed, but Benson is very upset after reading it. At this point, Stabler is still processing the death of his wife, so his behavior is fairly unpredictable. Benson, understanding the turmoil Stabler must be going through, is there for her friend, but it isn't without a few complications along the way.

## **Benson organizes an intervention for Stabler**

Stabler is left reeling after the death of Kathy, mainly because the car bombing was intended to kill him. PTSD and survivor's guilt are no joke and are something that after many years in the SVU Benson is very good at identifying. She arranges an intervention with Stabler and his children, and the dialogue is loaded, to say the least. At one point (while making eye contact with Benson), Stabler blurts out, "I love you." He quickly processes his words, adding, "I love all of you." Stabler is usually the one that keeps it all together, so watching him struggle throughout the first season of *Organized Crime* is a hard watch for many *SVU* fans.

## **Stabler finally reveals the contents of the letter**

So, what was in the letter that made Benson get so upset at Stabler? *SVU* fans wanted to know, with an online conversation surrounding the letter in the weeks and months that followed. Finally, in Season 2 of [*Organized Crime*](https://www.nbc.com/nbc-insider/franchise/law-order-organized-crime), Stabler confronts Benson about having never talked about the letter. Take note: Stabler is drugged during an undercover operation and arrives at Benson's apartment to have this important chat while still under the influence.

Stabler reveals the letter contents, essentially that Benson and Stabler weren't good for each other, that he hopes Benson finds a loyal and faithful man, and that they both got in each other's way as growing individuals. Stabler shockingly reveals that he didn't write the letter, but that it was penned by his wife, Kathy. But hold up, *one* line was written by Stabler: "In a parallel universe, it will always be you and I. I wrote that. I slipped it in there before sealing the envelope." Stabler then passes out from the drugs, leaving *SVU* fans everywhere with their jaws *on the floor.*

## **Stabler settles back into NYC for good**

At the end of Season 23 of *SVU*, Stabler reveals to Benson that he is looking for NYC apartments, essentially telling her that he is back in NYC for good. While Benson and Stabler both have their individually strong paths in motion, it's clear to [*SVU* fans that the decades-long friendship](https://www.nbc.com/nbc-insider/benson-and-stablers-most-dramatic-svu-moments) is back in full force.

[Season 24 of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*](https://www.nbc.com/nbc-insider/law-order-svu-will-return-season-24) and [Season 3 of *Law & Order: Organized Crime*](https://www.nbc.com/nbc-insider/law-order-organized-crime-will-return-season-3) return this fall to NBC on September 22.

Watch *Law & Order: SVU* on [Peacock](https://www.peacocktv.com/stream-tv/law-and-order-special-victims-unit?cid=2201libgennbenownedi5225&utm_campaign=2201libgen&utm_source=nbc_nbc_st-sv&utm_medium=own_edi_awa_artbl&utm_term=nbcviewers&utm_content=lawandordersvu) and [NBC](https://www.nbc.com/law-and-order-special-victims-unit).