



Missouri Economy Indicators

Childcare Trends

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Childcare employment has been slow to recover from COVID-19 disruptions, lagging behind much of the private sector's rebound. Between 2019 and 2023, Missouri's childcare workforce declined by 18%, a steeper drop compared to its border states and the U.S. (-16%). However, this trend has started to reverse, with Missouri seeing 4% growth in 2024 compared to 2020. While encouraging, Missouri's recovery remains slower than the national average (15%) and most neighboring states, except for Kansas (3%) and Iowa (1%). Notably, four in five Missouri employers cite childcare shortages as their [most significant workforce barrier](#).

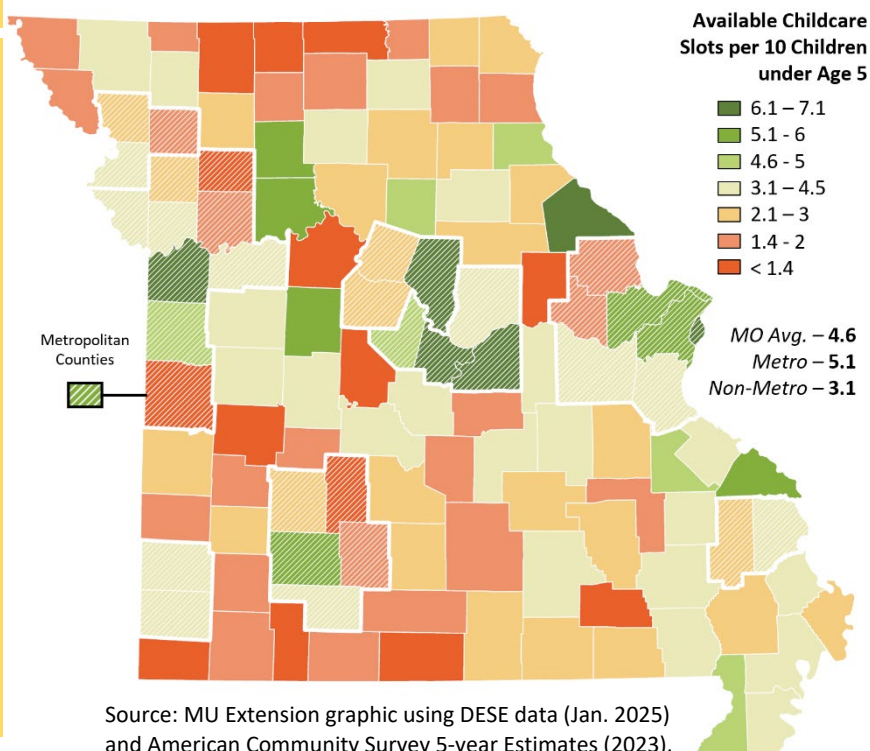
In January 2025, Missouri had 81 fewer registered childcare facilities than a year prior, serving 916 fewer children. Despite an overall decline, some counties saw growth in childcare availability. Nonmetro counties like Dade (15.4%), Linn (13.0%) and Randolph (9.3%) saw the highest growth in childcare availability, while Howard County (9.9%) led among metro areas. In contrast, Marion (-9.2%), Clinton (-8.1%) and Dallas (-7.9%) counties saw the steepest declines. Statewide, just under half (45%) of Missouri counties reported increased childcare capacity in 2025.

Childcare Availability Struggles in Nonmetro Missouri

On average, Missouri has roughly 4.6 available childcare slots for every 10 children under age five, down from 4.7 in January 2024. Access remains uneven, with nonmetro counties averaging 3.1 slots, compared to 5.1 in metro counties.

Cole County has the highest childcare availability relative to its population, with 7.1 slots for every 10 children, followed by Osage (7.0), Boone (6.8) and Pike (6.7) counties. Mercer County has the lowest coverage (0.4). More than a quarter of Missouri counties (27.8%) have four or fewer childcare facilities, up from 27.2% in 2024.

Childcare Availability in Missouri January 2025



Childcare Workforce Recovering but Challenges Remain

Childcare employment declined sharply following the pandemic and, despite a partial rebound, remained below pre-recession levels through 2022. By 2024, childcare employment recovered and began to grow.

Simultaneously, Missouri's under five population has been shrinking, mirroring the national trend (-5%) with a 4% decline over four years.

Among Missouri's border states,

only Tennessee experienced growth in this age group. While fewer children requiring care offsets some workforce shortages, the gap between available childcare and demand remains substantial.

Low wages continue to drive turnover in the childcare workforce. The average American childcare worker earns roughly \$14 per hour—less than 98% of other occupations. Turnover among childcare workers is about [65%](#) higher than the typical job, in contrast to preschool and kindergarten teachers, whose turnover rates align with the average occupation. From 2010 to 2022, 14.9% of childcare workers left their jobs, compared with 8.5% of early childhood educators and 9.1% of workers across all occupations.

Beyond workforce challenges, childcare remains a leading household expense. A U.S. Department of the Treasury report found childcare unaffordable for [60%](#) of American families that need it. In Missouri, the average annual cost of full-time care is \$8,100—nearly 14% of a family's median income. For single parents and rural families, the financial burden is far greater, according to a January 2025 report from [Child Care Aware of Missouri](#).

To help address workforce challenges, the Missouri Department of Higher Education & Workforce Development launched the [Mo Excels Workforce Initiative](#), which funds the development and expansion of employer-driven education and training programs, including entrepreneurship. Through this initiative, MU Extension is developing resources to lower barriers to entry for those entering the childcare workforce and for those looking to open a childcare center.

Additional Resources and Notes

- DESE's [Show Me Childcare Provider Search](#) is a tool for finding available childcare across the state.
- The [Missouri of Chamber of Commerce and Industry](#) offers childcare providers access to its healthcare plans. Providers can join a plan as a single pool, which lowers costs.

All Missouri Economy Indicators briefs in this series are available at <http://muext.us/MissouriEconomyIndicators>

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Region	Childcare Employment			Under-5 Population		
	2020	2024	2020-24 Change	2020	2024	2020-24 Change
United States	1,082,898	1,240,313	15%	19,650,192	18,706,104	-5%
Missouri	21,811	22,627	4%	371,046	355,992	-4%
Arkansas	11,220	13,168	17%	188,445	182,213	-3%
Illinois	45,505	50,049	10%	755,518	673,638	-11%
Iowa	19,852	19,992	1%	195,462	188,006	-4%
Kansas	11,313	11,689	3%	188,853	178,236	-6%
Kentucky	12,281	15,511	26%	273,575	266,126	-3%
Nebraska	12,464	13,264	6%	130,742	126,344	-3%
Oklahoma	12,347	13,914	13%	259,003	245,724	-5%
Tennessee	17,497	19,143	9%	406,986	419,210	3%
Border States (Combined)	142,479	156,731	10%	2,398,584	2,279,497	-5%

Source: Lightcast estimates of payroll and self-employed childcare industry employment & wages.

Note: 2024 population calculated using July 1, 2024, total population estimates and 2023 percentage of under-5 population.