

Missouri Economy Indicators

Neurodivergence in the Workforce

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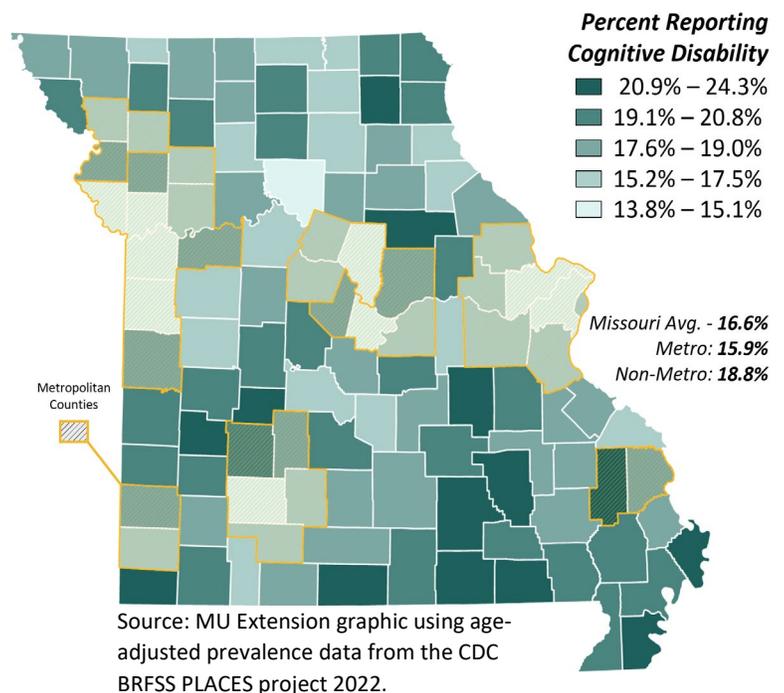
Across Missouri, many neurodivergent individuals (those with autism, ADHD, dyslexia and other cognitive differences) remain underemployed, despite possessing valuable traits like hyperfocus, creative problem-solving, pattern recognition and resilience that are in high demand across industries. However, stigma, limited support services and inaccessible infrastructure continue to limit opportunities, especially in rural areas, where underdiagnosis and scarce resources make challenges even greater. To build a future-ready workforce, Missouri must intentionally include neurodivergent talent to boost innovation, close skill gaps and strengthen the state's economy.

Cognitive Disability in Missouri

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) uses cognitive disability as a proxy measure for neurodivergence among adults. In 2022, the CDC asked respondents whether they had difficulty concentrating, remembering or making decisions due to a physical, mental or emotional condition.

On average, cognitive disability rates were higher in Missouri's nonmetro areas (18.8%) than in metro areas (15.9%). Among nonmetro counties, rates ranged from 15.2% in Chariton to 24.3% in Ozark. In metro counties, rates ranged from 13.8% in Boone to 22.1% in Bollinger.

Cognitive Disability Among Adults, by County



Neurodivergent Talent Underutilized

Missouri's underutilization of neurodivergent talent represents both a workforce challenge and a missed economic opportunity. Research shows that only [16%](#) of autistic adults are employed full time, and many are significantly overqualified for the roles they hold. For individuals with ADHD, job instability is common, as [60%](#) have lost or changed jobs due to symptoms. These statistics point to systemic barriers, not lack of ability.

With the right support and inclusive work environments, neurodivergent individuals can excel in roles that require precision, creativity and unconventional thinking. Emerging technologies, such as generative AI and innovation management platforms, can help bridge communication gaps and foster more effective idea sharing and collaboration.

Efforts to build entrepreneurial self-efficacy, especially in rural and underserved areas, could unlock pathways to self-employment and high-impact innovation. With strategic investments in accessible training, comprehensive hiring practices and community-based support systems, Missouri can become more inclusive and shift neurodiversity into a competitive advantage.

Many industries stand to benefit by engaging more neurodiverse individuals in the workforce. For example, agriculture, a cornerstone of the rural Midwest economy, faces a significant talent shortage. A [recent analysis](#) of businesses across eight Midwest states, including Missouri, found that 75% of employers cited a shortage of skilled workers as the primary barrier to expanding employment.

Cognitive Disability and Social Isolation

Neurodivergent individuals, especially in rural areas, often face fewer opportunities for socialization, both in the community and workplace. Research shows that social isolation—a lack of social interaction and a limited social network—is consistently linked to cognitive decline and an increased risk of dementia. Loneliness can negatively impact mental health by increasing stress and decreasing motivation for cognitively stimulating tasks, potentially compounding existing cognitive challenges. On average, Missouri’s nonmetro counties report higher rates of cognitive disability. However, feelings of social isolation are widespread across the state, with higher average rates in metro counties (33.1%) than nonmetro counties (32.5%).

To help address these and other staffing challenges, MU Extension’s [Career Accelerator](#) leads a series of [Workforce Development Summits](#) across Missouri. These summits offer employers a space to identify skills and training gaps, exchange resources and insights and learn how to better accommodate individuals in the workplace. Employers of all sizes can expand their talent pool by improving recruitment, hiring, and onboarding practices, opening doors for more local residents ready to contribute their skills.

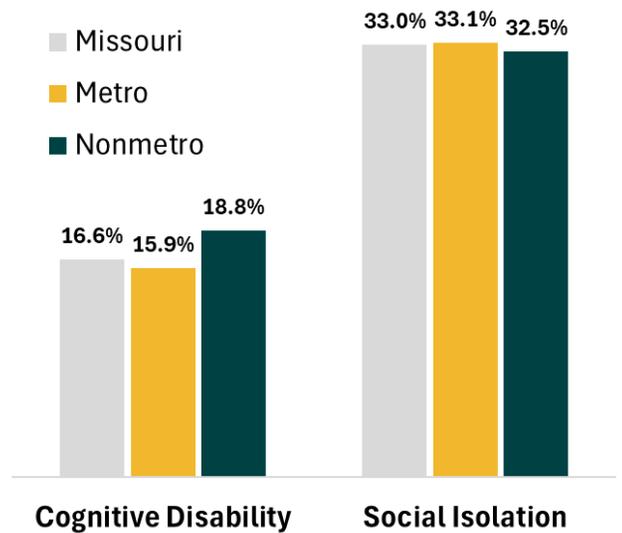
Additional Notes and Resources

- The [U.S. Department of Labor](#) has resources to help employers, service providers and policymakers support employees on the autism spectrum. Resources for students on the spectrum are also available.
- Upcoming MU Extension [Workforce Summits](#) include: Aug. 28 in Columbia, Sept. 30 in Hannibal, Oct. 9 in Maryville, Oct. 23 in Sikeston, Nov. 14 in Warrensburg and Nov. 19 virtually.

All Missouri Economy Indicators briefs in this series are available at <http://muext.us/MissouriEconomyIndicators>
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Cognitive Disability and Social Isolation Among Adults



Source: MU Extension graphic using data from CDC BRFSS PLACES project 2022.