



Missouri Economy Indicators

Young Worker Trends

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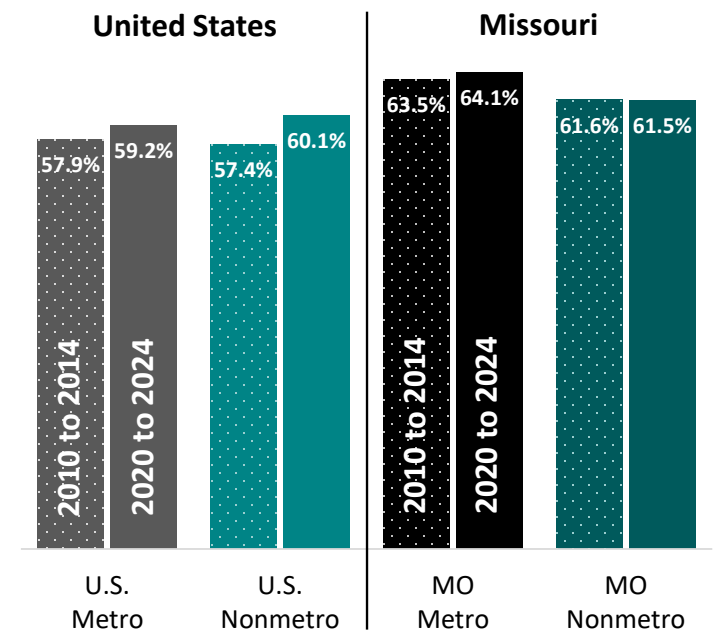
Missouri’s young labor force, aged 16 to 24, is shrinking. According to the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2024 five-year estimates, this population declined 2.8% over the past decade, leaving 21,000 fewer potential youth workers. Despite this decline, Missouri youth continue to participate in the labor market at a rate above the national average. Although hiring among younger adults has recently slowed, long-term trends indicate that labor shortages will likely continue as fewer youths enter the workforce. Investing in upskilling initiatives—including on-the-job training, apprenticeships, and collaboration with education providers—can strengthen talent pipelines, support career advancement for youths, and help communities meet evolving workforce needs.

Younger Workers’ Labor Force Participation Higher in Metros

Missouri’s metro youth labor force participation has increased over the past decade and is now 2.5 percentage points higher than in nonmetro areas. Local participation rates vary with economic conditions and access to affordable education and training options.

Overall, these gains suggest that most young adults who are likely to work are already in the labor force, leaving limited capacity to fill job vacancies in industries that rely on them. As a result, businesses may invest in labor-saving technology, relocate to larger labor markets when possible, or, in some cases, close.

Labor Force Participation Rates for Young Workers, Ages 16 to 24



Source: MU Extension graphic using U.S. Census American Community Survey 2010-14 and 2020-24 five-year estimates.

Employees under age 25 made up 16% of Missouri’s private-sector workforce in the third quarter of 2025, according to Census figures. They are an important part of Missouri’s tourism and service economy, holding 39% of leisure and hospitality jobs and 25% of retail jobs. Restaurants are by far the largest employers of young workers, accounting for one in four jobs held by Missouri youth. While these are typically entry-level roles, they provide valuable work experience and a foundation for career growth.

Nonmetro counties depend more heavily on younger workers than metro areas do. Youth account for 18.4% of private-sector employment in nonmetro counties, compared with 15.8% in metro areas. Rural manufacturing and construction firms also rely more heavily on youth, with shares roughly 3 to 5 percentage points higher than in metro areas.

Missouri High School Graduates Increasingly Enter Workforce

Most Missouri high school graduates continue to pursue education at two- and four-year colleges, a long-standing trend. However, the share of students pursuing postsecondary education immediately after graduation has declined since 2012, according to data from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). Nationally, postsecondary enrollment began to soften in the mid-2010s. Apart from COVID-19 disruptions and the recent hiring slowdown, a strong labor market and rising college costs over the past decade have led more young adults to choose work after high school.

In 2025, 30% of Missouri metro-area high school graduates entered the workforce (civilian or military) shortly after graduation, up 9 percentage points from 2015. Among nonmetro graduates, 39% entered the workforce, an 8-point increase over the decade. The county map shows the 2022–25 average share of young adults entering the workforce after high school, with higher concentrations generally seen in south-central Missouri.

Job openings in Missouri's South Central Workforce Region indicate strong demand for health care workers. While some positions, such as home health aides, do not require a college degree, most health care jobs require postsecondary education or certification. Other in-demand occupations that typically do not require a college degree but offer higher wages with training or experience include maintenance workers and machinery mechanics.

While entry-level jobs remain plentiful, a shrinking youth population will make it increasingly important to upskill these workers and provide advancement opportunities. Partnerships between local industries and school districts can help by exposing students to career pathways, workplace expectations, and the skills employers value.

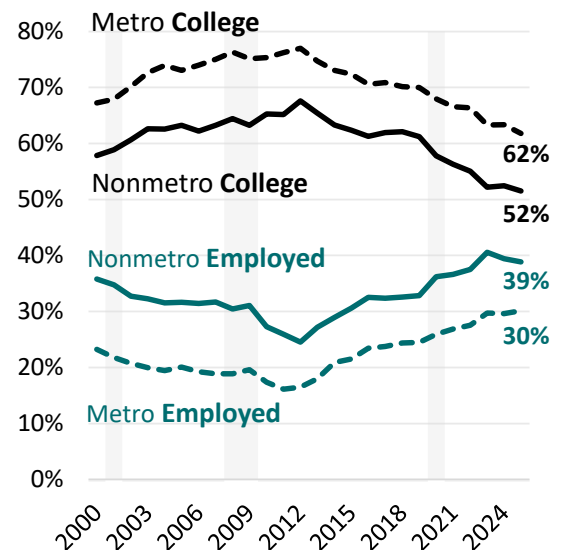
Additional Notes and Resources

- The Missouri Economic Research and Information Center provides [occupational demand data](#) for Missouri's regions, including top jobs by different levels of education and experience.

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**Missouri High School Grads
Entering College or Workforce**
By Metro and Nonmetro Areas



High School Grads Entering Workforce
Average Share for 2022–25 Graduates

