



Missouri Economy Indicators

Childcare Access

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Childcare employment continues to lag other industries, even years after the private sector has rebounded from COVID-19 disruptions. Since 2019, Missouri has experienced a more significant decline in its childcare workforce (-18%) compared to its border states and the U.S. (-16%). In December 2023, the Missouri Chamber of Commerce and Industry reported that [80%](#) of surveyed employers identified the expense and difficulty of finding childcare as a significant workforce barrier. Childcare shortages are estimated to result in an annual cost of [\\$1.35](#) billion for Missouri.

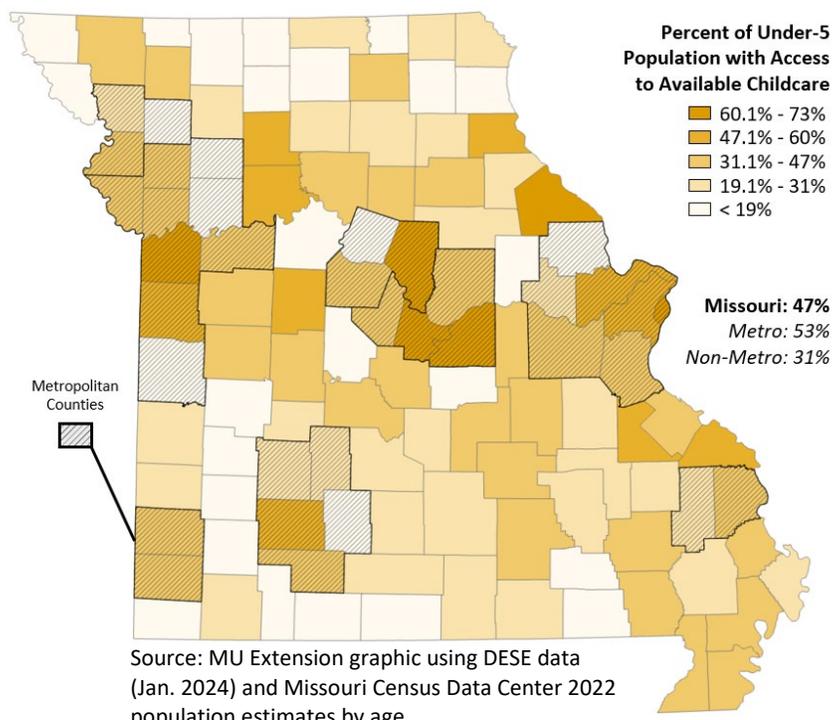
In 2024, Missouri had 17 fewer registered childcare facilities than in the previous year, yet served an additional 378 children. Notably, nonmetro counties like Iron (13.7%), Shelby (10.1%), New Madrid (10.0%) and Pemiscot (9.9%) saw the highest growth in childcare availability. Among metro counties, St. Louis City (9.7%) experienced the greatest increase. Stoddard (-7.0), Howard (-9.3%) and Camden (-9.7%) counties saw the greatest losses. Overall, two-thirds of Missouri counties saw an increase in childcare capacity in 2023, with an average growth of 3.3%. Among counties experiencing a decrease, the average decline was -2.8%. Alarming, the Center for American Progress states that [54%](#) of Missouri residents live in childcare deserts—census tracts with either no childcare or more than three times as many children as available slots.

Childcare Availability Struggles in Nonmetro Missouri

On average, there are roughly 4.7 available childcare slots for every 10 children under the age of 5 in Missouri, up from 4.5 in January 2023. This average drops to 3.1 in nonmetro counties, compared to 5.3 in metro counties.

Cole County has the most available childcare, covering 73% of children under the age of 5, followed by Boone (72.9%), Osage (72.1%) and St. Louis City (71.6%). Mercer County has the least coverage, with only 4.6% of children covered. More than one-quarter of Missouri counties (25.2%) have four or fewer childcare facilities, up from 23.5% in 2023.

Childcare Availability in Missouri January 2024



Following COVID-19, Childcare Workforce is Still Recovering

Childcare employment dropped sharply following the pandemic, with a partial rebound that still left employment below pre-recession levels by 2022.

Missouri's childcare workforce shrank by 4,874 (-18%) between 2019 and 2022, the highest decline among neighboring states both

during and following the pandemic. During this same period, Missouri's under-5 population decreased by 5%. The decline in children requiring care mitigates the downward trend in the childcare workforce to a degree, but the gap between available care and children in need remains substantial.

American childcare workers earn roughly \$14 per hour, less than 98% of other occupations; due in part to low wages, turnover for childcare workers continues to pose challenges. In 2022, Missouri's childcare workforce witnessed 17,862 new hires and 17,759 separations, resulting in a net gain of only 103 workers. The churn in the childcare workforce is likely to continue with increasing demands and persistently low wages.

In addition to workforce challenges, childcare is a leading household expense; the U.S. Department of the Treasury states that childcare is unaffordable for [60%](#) of American families that need it. A 2020 report from Child Care Aware found that the annual cost of center-based infant care in Missouri was [\\$9,880](#), 15% of the state's median income.

To address these issues, the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) is launching the [Child Care Data System](#) (CCDS) this month. This system consolidates online resources and allows families to search for providers and apply for childcare subsidies; providers can also use the CCDS to apply for subsidy contracts with the state. The CCDS aims to reduce the burden of applying for childcare subsidies and increase interest from potential contracted childcare providers.

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		
	2019	2022	2019-22 Change	2019	2022	2019-22 Change
United States	1,442,218	1,214,461	-16%	19,404,835	18,358,199	-6%
Missouri	27,207	22,333	-18%	365,451	349,648	-5%
Arkansas	11,592	9,920	-14%	183,327	177,765	-3%
Illinois	52,570	50,679	-4%	742,404	674,211	-10%
Iowa	19,122	16,878	-12%	190,606	180,010	-6%
Kansas	16,350	14,620	-11%	183,236	176,673	-4%
Kentucky	19,621	18,764	-4%	273,130	260,433	-5%
Nebraska	15,069	14,064	-7%	129,551	121,107	-7%
Oklahoma	15,279	14,634	-4%	251,083	240,173	-5%
Tennessee	26,163	22,553	-14%	407,026	402,215	-1%
<i>Border States (Combined)</i>	175,766	162,111	-8%	2,360,363	2,232,587	-6%

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