



Child Care Landscape in Missouri

Executive Summary

When the coronavirus came to the U.S. in 2020, no one could have predicted just how much it would ravage so many systems and structures—both nationally and around the world. Industries like healthcare, leisure and hospitality, entertainment, and transportation all suffered as the pandemic wreaked havoc on the economy and as society adapted to a “new normal.” One industry, too-often sidelined but absolutely crucial in our modern-day economy, has been significantly impacted: child care. In the months since COVID-19 has changed the world, it seems that policymakers, legislators, journalists, and communities are finally recognizing how foundational the child care industry is to the economy—a fact that experts in the field have trumpeted for decades.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately 25% of children under the age of five were in some form of organized child care arrangement, including child care centers, nurseries, and preschools ([Center for American Progress](#) 2012). Child care programs provide a place for parents to send their children so they can participate in the workforce, provide for their families, and contribute to the economy. As a recent report from ReadyNation revealed, “This child care crisis costs our country \$57 billion per year” ([Missouri Times](#) July 2020).

Child care truly is the backbone of the American economy.
And in its current state, that backbone is going to break.



How the Pandemic Changed Child Care in Missouri

Both before and during the pandemic, Child Care Aware® of Missouri (CCAMO) has been collecting and analyzing data around child care in the State. The figures demonstrate what child care experts have long known: Missouri is rife with child care deserts (a county with greater than 50 children under age 5 that contains either no child care providers or so few options that there are more than 3 times as many children as licensed child care slots). These deserts have increased dramatically since the pandemic, leaving few options for families.

	Child Care Desert		
	Pre-Pandemic (February 2020)	Pandemic Stage (June 2020)	Increase (%)
Total Counties	115	115	-
Total Population	5,988,927	5,988,927	-
Desert Counties	63	94	49%
Number of Individuals Impacted by Child Care Deserts	1,210,605	2,758,809	128%
Additional Child Care Capacity Needed	8,286	19,707	138%
Number of Counties w/o Child Care	0	8	8

In Missouri, there are 252,737 first responders or healthcare workers in the workforce. Before the pandemic, 23,331 within this population needed child care. During the pandemic, that number skyrocketed to 64,072 ([School's Out: Childcare Needs among Essential Health Care Workers and First Responders April 2020](#)).

While the need for child care is still unknown, the supply has significantly decreased. Per CCAMO's database, there were 3,301 open child care programs prior to the pandemic. As of July 2020, that number decreased to 2,223, with most programs operating at partial capacity. Many programs closed temporarily at the beginning of the pandemic, and although the expectation is that more will reopen, the reality is that the economic crisis will lead many to shut their doors permanently, ultimately widening an already-vast child care desert. Further, as shown in the table above, since the pandemic, of the 115 counties in Missouri, the number of child care desert counties has increased by 49%, indicating that child care services have become harder to find.

What Does This Mean for Child Care Programs and the Families They Serve?

Child care providers have largely been left to fend for themselves, serving as essential workers with no hazard pay, no health benefits, while struggling to obtain resources such as personal protective equipment and cleaning supplies. The Center for American Progress estimates that “the country could lose half of its licensed child care capacity without government intervention. Millions of American workers, hoping to get back to their jobs once the public health risk has sufficiently decreased, will not be able to do so until they have safe, reliable, and affordable child care. This has major consequences for the reopening of the economy but also has important implications for income and educational inequality, racial equity, geographic equity, and a potentially significant decline in the number of mothers in the labor force” ([Center for American Progress](#), April 24, 2020).

The child care crisis extends beyond just families. In Missouri, the median wage for child care educators was \$9.96 in 2017—less than the living wage of \$10.76 (Early Childhood Workforce Index 2018). At the beginning of the pandemic, nearly two-thirds of child care providers said they could only maintain their businesses for a month during the stay-at-home orders, only 11% said they could survive indefinitely, and two out of every five programs are estimated to shut their doors permanently ([National Association for the Education of Young Children](#) 2020).



“The country could lose half of its licensed child care capacity without government intervention. Millions of American workers... will not be able to [return to work] ...”

Center for American Progress, April 24, 2020



How Missouri Is Addressing These Challenges

CCAMO amplified our efforts, recognizing the critical situation for child care programs. We expanded our child care provider referral services to address the increased need for child care need for essential service providers. Additionally, CCAMO has connected child care programs to resources and supplies, and has raised awareness around opportunities like the Paycheck Protection Program. We also funded mini-grants for child care programs in ZIP codes with a significant number of low-income households and high rates of positive COVID-19 cases.

Even as federal policymakers have taken steps to address the child care crisis through the CARES Act emergency funding, many early childhood education leaders across Missouri are advocating for widespread change in the industry. CCAMO has contributed to policy changes by drawing critical attention to issues via op-eds, partnering with legislators, and advising policymakers. In June, Kids Win Missouri, a children's advocacy coalition, and Child Care Aware® of America joined efforts, calling for Congress to invest another \$50 billion through the Child Care & Development Block Grant (CCDBG) to stabilize the child care industry.

What Next?

COVID-19 has not broken the child care system, it has simply hastened its inevitable collapse. Without a substantial reframing of the system, child care educators will no longer be financially equipped to care for millions of children, leaving them without the means to support their own families or follow their passion for caregiving and teaching. Without these educators, families will have to choose between staying at home with their children or pursuing their career and educational goals. And without child care programs, many children will miss out on crucial social and emotional support during formative years. In the end, when the child care industry is not supported and valued, we all lose.