

High-quality, reliable child care plays a critical role in supporting Missouri’s working families, strengthening the workforce, and driving economic growth. Accessibility—shaped by factors such as availability, proximity, cost, and quality—can vary significantly, leaving some families with limited options, particularly in underserved areas. Disparities often exist between counties and even within zip codes. With two-thirds of children aged five and younger in the United States having both parents in the labor force, access to child care services is essential. Understanding the current landscape helps identify challenges and opportunities, enabling stakeholders to develop targeted solutions and allocate resources where they are most needed.

What Does a Capacity Analysis Tell Us?

When evaluating child care supply and demand in Missouri, it is crucial to consider not only the number of child care slots available but also whether the types of care meet community needs. Child Care Aware® of Missouri has long-tracked child care deserts - geographic areas lacking sufficient child care options. This capacity analysis of new data presented here offers deeper insights by analyzing how counties serve children under six years of age, specifically infants and toddlers (birth to 23 months) and preschoolers (ages two to five years old).

Using this data, we can better understand how child care slots are distributed by age groups and assess whether there are enough slots for infants and toddlers, preschoolers, and the population of children under age six as a whole. While a standard child care desert report identifies areas with severe shortages, this information pinpoints which specific age groups are currently underserved and highlights the lack of full-time care.

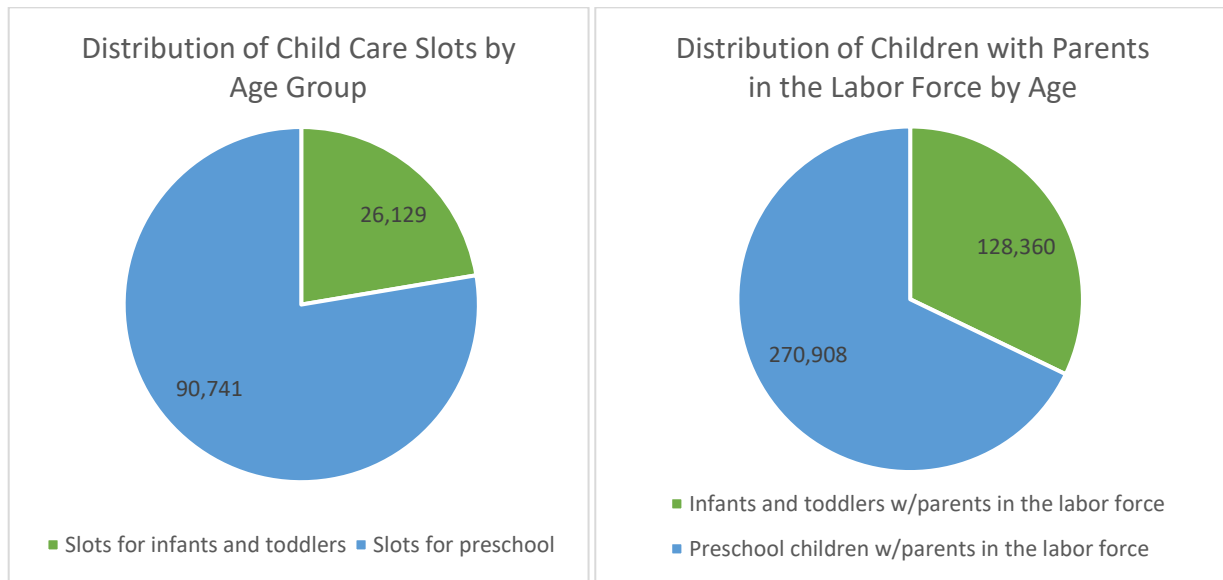
Key Data Insights

Understanding the complexity of child care data is essential for meaningful insights and effective decision-making. When reviewing the child care landscape, it is crucial to recognize the data's scope and assumptions to accurately contextualize the findings. Specifically, this analysis aims to provide a comprehensive view by including both licensed and license-exempt child care programs, offering insights into maximum capacity, and reflecting an optimal operating environment. Below are key points to keep in mind when interpreting this data.

- **Comprehensive Program Coverage:** This analysis includes both licensed and license-exempt child care programs.
- **Maximum Capacity Analysis:** The data uses the highest possible number of licensed slots by age group (birth to 23 months and two to five years).
- **Considering Optimal Operating Conditions:** The numbers provided in this report reflect the current maximum potential capacity based on child care programs being sufficiently supported, efficiently operated, and adequately staffed. No adjustments are made for programs operating below capacity due to limited director qualifications, staffing shortages, or other constraints.

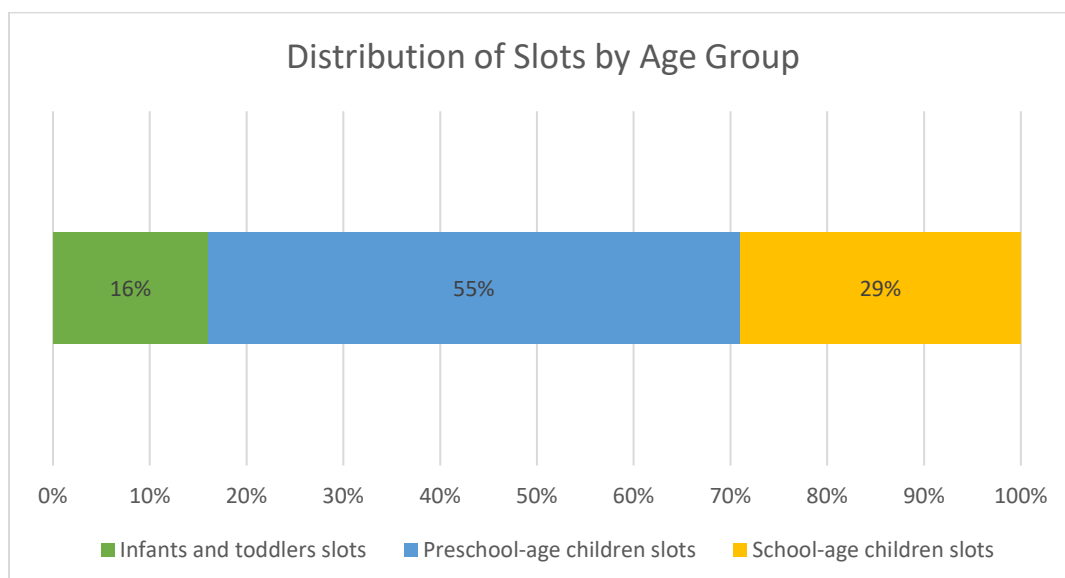
Data Visualizations

Child care in Missouri serves a wide range of needs, but significant gaps remain. The graphs below compare the distribution of slots between infants and toddlers and preschool-age children to the population distribution of these age groups with parents in the labor force. The comparison underscores how parents of infants and toddlers face a greater disadvantage in accessing child care, as **the proportion of slots for infants and toddlers does not keep pace with their population size.**



Approximately **71% of available slots are designated for children under six**, while **29% are reserved for school-age children.**

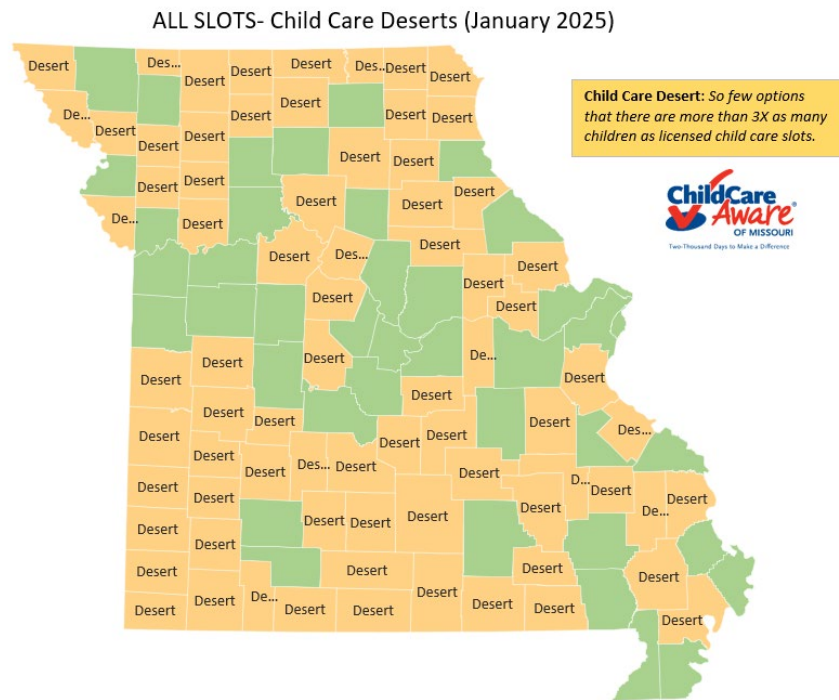
When broken down by age group, the distribution reveals that only **16% of total slots statewide serve infants and toddlers**, while **55% serve preschool-aged children (ages two to five years)**. This imbalance highlights the limited availability of care for younger children.



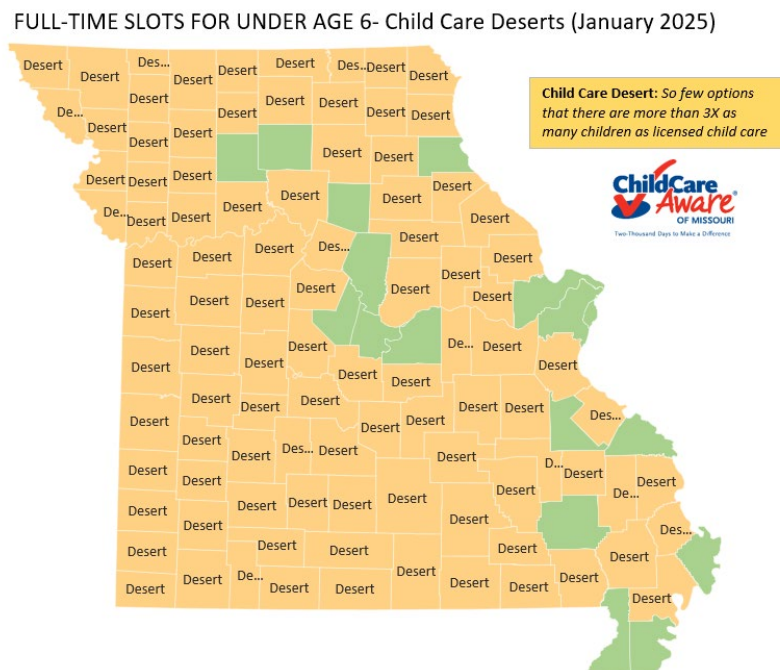
MISSOURI CHILD CARE CAPACITY ANALYSIS

Additionally, **15% of child care programs offer only part-time care.** While part-time programs play an essential role in providing educational and enrichment opportunities for young children, this does not always meet the needs of working families. When considering that part-time child care programs cannot fully support working families, Missouri’s desert map for children under age six years with parents in the labor force is significantly impacted. The next two maps show the impact when all slots are included versus when only those that offer full-time care are included. In the first map, half-day preschools, after-care programs, and other types of part-time care are considered in the desert counts. In the second map, these types of programs are excluded to focus only on the availability of full-time care.

Map 1: Prevalence of deserts when all licensed slots, including part-time programs, are counted.

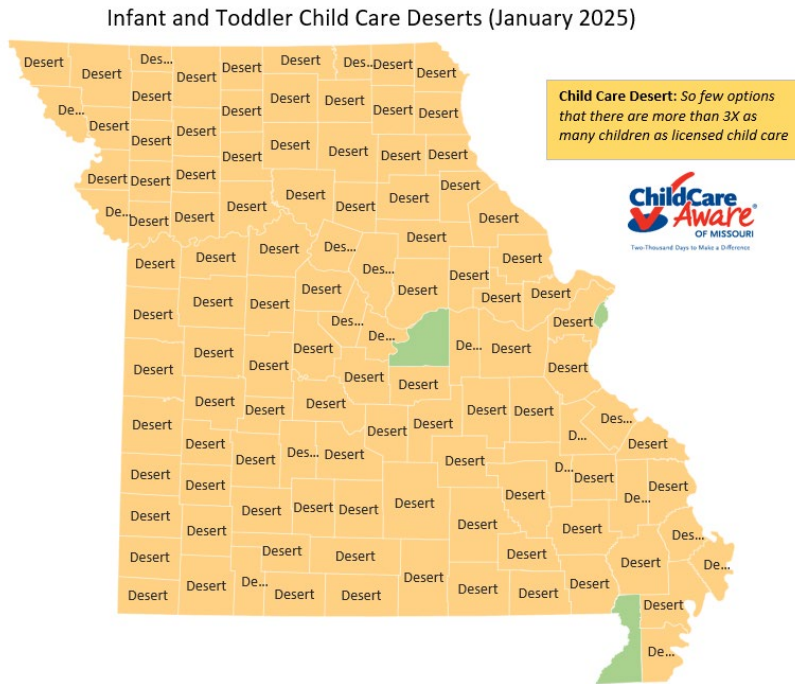


Map 2: Prevalence of child care deserts when only full-time care slots for children under six are considered.



MISSOURI CHILD CARE CAPACITY ANALYSIS

Infant and toddler care is particularly constrained, with only **66% of Missouri’s child care programs licensed to serve children under the age of two**. The desert map below illustrates the severity of Missouri’s infant and toddler child care shortage. As a result, 97% (112 out of 115 counties) of the state is in a child care desert for this age group.



Conclusion and Call to Action

This analysis offers a clearer view of Missouri's child care landscape, highlighting the persistent shortage of infant and toddler child care. It is essential to examine both the age groups being served and the availability of full-time care to meet the demands of working families. This analysis shows that even if all programs operated at full capacity, demand still would not be met. Additionally, due to ongoing challenges, such as staffing shortages, many programs operate below their licensed capacity, exasperating the problem. Lastly, quality child care programming should emphasize low staff-child ratios, especially for infants and toddlers. Addressing these capacity gaps while also maintaining quality is essential to ensuring comprehensive child care coverage in Missouri for children of all ages.

To build a stronger child care system in Missouri, turning insights into actionable strategies is essential:

1. **Fostering Collaboration:** Engage government, public, and private organizations to strengthen the child care sector, boost the economy, and better support families.
2. **Supporting Viability:** Like any business, child care programs need assistance with budgeting, business planning, and operations management. These small businesses play a critical role in promoting opportunities for families, creating jobs, and fostering local innovation.
3. **Expanding Access:** Assist individuals and organizations in establishing new facilities where demand is high, ensuring flexibility for long-term sustainability and community needs.

Sources:

- Missouri Census Data Center
- Department of Elementary and Secondary Education - Office of Childhood
- U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates 2019-2023
- Work Life Systems Database, Child Care Aware® of Missouri