

BCA Market Perspective © Headwinds for US Households January 2026

Consumption, the sum of household spending on everything from cars to groceries to healthcare, remains the primary driver of the American economy. According to J.P. Morgan Asset Management, consumer spending maintained a dominant 68% average share of nominal GDP between 2000 and 2024. Simply put, for the U.S. economy to thrive, the consumer must be active. As we look toward 2026, assessing the average household's financial health is critical to forecasting our national growth trajectory.

Following a brief -0.6% contraction in the first quarter of 2025, the U.S. economy roared back with robust growth of 3.8% in Q2 and 4.3% in Q3. This resurgence was fueled primarily by resilient personal consumption and a surge in net exports. While Q4 estimates range widely—from 1.5% to 5.5% across the Atlanta Fed, Philly Fed, and S&P Global—the consensus remains firmly positive. Looking toward 2026, the consumer outlook provides a mixed picture, with affordability, a weakening labor market and concerning debt levels viewed as potential headwinds.

	2000 - 2024		
	Share of nominal GDP	Avg. contribution	3Q25 contribution
Consumption	68%	1.7%	2.4%
Bus. fixed investment	13%	0.4%	0.4%
Gov't spending	19%	0.3%	0.4%
Residential	4%	0.0%	-0.2%
Net exports	-4%	-0.1%	1.6%
Chg. in private inventories	-	0.0%	-0.2%
Real GDP	100%	2.3%	4.3%

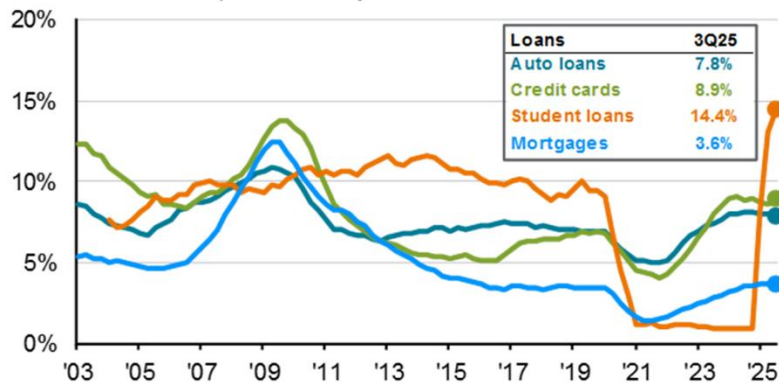
Affordability: Price stability remains elusive as September's Consumer Price Index (CPI) hit +3.0%, stubbornly exceeding the Federal Reserve's 2.0% target. While more recent October, November, and December reports suggest a cooling trend, these figures are clouded by data collection gaps caused by the recent government shutdown. Adding to the complexity is a 10.8% average effective tariff rate and rising domestic costs in healthcare and utilities. Notably, the AI revolution is now impacting household bills; the immense power requirements of data centers are straining the U.S. grid, prompting utility companies to hike rates in anticipation of future infrastructure buildouts. With electricity and natural gas prices already up 6.7% and 10.8% respectively in 2025, the cumulative weight of these costs threatens to erode discretionary income and dampen consumer spending.

Weakening Labor Market: Heading into 2026, the consumer faces a weakening labor market. The close of 2025 revealed clear signs of exhaustion in the jobs market: November's unemployment rate rose to 4.6% from 4.0% in October (WSJ 1/9/26), and the three-month average for non-farm payrolls slowed to just 22,000, a sharp decline from earlier in the year. While a sub 5.0% unemployment rate generally aligns with the Federal Reserve's view of full employment, any further erosion in hiring could pivot the consumer from resilience to retrenchment.

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Flows into early delinquencies

% of balance delinquent 30+ days



Household Debt: Aggregate household debt reached a record \$18 trillion in the third quarter of 2025, spanning mortgages, auto loans, and credit cards. Asset quality is under increasing pressure; delinquency rates for auto loans and credit cards have climbed to 7.8% and 8.9% respectively, while mortgage delinquencies have edged up to 3.6%. This burden is set to intensify following the May 2025 resumption of collections on defaulted student loan in the federal loan portfolio. Furthermore, the December termination of the SAVE Program, which provided the most affordable student loan repayment path, leaves approximately 7 million borrowers facing significantly higher monthly payments. Without a comparable replacement, this sudden shift in debt service obligations will be a primary headwind for discretionary spending in 2026.

Could policy changes affect the headline risks above?

While risks remain, several significant "relief valves" are set to support the consumer in 2026. The passage of the **One Big Beautiful Bill (OB BB)**, which extends and expands the 2017 tax provisions, is expected to drive a surge in liquidity. Because the IRS did not adjust withholding for the retroactive 2025 cuts, the average tax refund is projected to jump nearly 25%, rising from around \$3,200 to approximately \$4,000 this spring. Simultaneously, the Federal Reserve's pivot in interest rate policy is easing the debt burden; following three rate cuts in 2025, further easing is anticipated for 2026. This monetary support is bolstered by a precipitous decline in consumer fuel costs. With national gasoline prices trending toward \$2.50 per gallon, the resulting savings are set to boost discretionary income, acting as a dual win through lowering household expenses and reducing operational overhead for businesses.

Furthermore, the Administration's recent proposals to offer 50-year mortgages, restrict Wall Street from buying single family homes, and the potential purchase of upwards of \$200 billion in mortgage bonds show an intentional effort and decisive steps toward reducing borrowing costs. These initiatives, while still in their early stages, illustrate a broader 2026 White House mandate for housing affordability, with further consumer-centric measures likely in development.

While 2025's economic headwinds may persist in 2026, BCA believes that the shifts noted above could potentially transform them into significant tailwinds.

Source:

<https://am.jpmorgan.com/us/en/asset-management/adv/insights/market-insights/guide-to-the-markets/>

<https://www.wesh.com/article/student-loans-delinquency-rates-rising/69631864>

<https://www.bls.gov/news.release/cpi.nr0.htm>