

# US Daily: How We Think About Recession Risk (Mericle)

- The US economy does not appear to be on the brink of recession at the moment. In thinking about the odds of a recession next year, we break the risks into three categories: (1) the risk that a recession will prove necessary to bring inflation down, (2) the risk that the Fed will cause a recession that is not necessary, and (3) the risk that something else will cause a recession.
- The odds that a recession will prove necessary have fallen a little because the first two steps of the required adjustment—slowing GDP growth to a below-potential pace and rebalancing supply and demand in the labor market have gone remarkably well so far. But it would be premature to say that this risk has fallen too much until we see consistent evidence that labor market rebalancing is slowing wage growth and breaking the wage-price feedback loop.
- The odds that the Fed will cause a recession that is not necessary have likely risen somewhat. It is increasingly clear that shelter and health care inflation and by extension commonly used measures of the underlying inflation trend such as trimmed-mean inflation—are likely to remain uncomfortably high throughout 2023 and would even if the labor market rebalanced tomorrow. While it is not our base case, we see some risk that too great a focus on lagging indicators, too little patience, or tightening too quickly to gauge the impact on the economy could result in a recession that is not necessary.
- The odds that some unforeseen factor will cause a recession are likely somewhat higher than usual. We doubt the global growth slowdown is enough to tip the US economy into recession, but potential disturbances from global market developments are more unpredictable.
- Our recession odds of 35% over the next 12 months are roughly triple the unconditional average for a typical year in recent decades but are well below the 63% consensus odds. One aspect of the consensus forecast that we are particularly skeptical of is the implicit view that rate hikes of the size we expect or just a bit larger will be enough to cause a recession.

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# How We Think About Recession Risk

The US economy is growing well below its long-term potential rate but does not appear to be on the brink of recession at the moment. Most indicators of activity growth remain low but positive, <u>real disposable income</u> has stopped falling and should now grow at a healthy pace, and job growth remains strong and looks unlikely to turn negative abruptly because demand for workers remains high.

In thinking about the odds of a recession next year, we break the risks into three categories: (1) the risk that a recession will prove necessary to bring inflation down, (2) the risk that the Fed will cause a recession that is not necessary, and (3) the risk that something else will cause a recession.

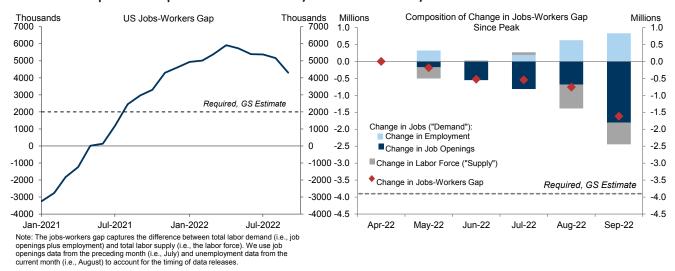
The first risk, that a recession will prove necessary, has diminished a little because the first two steps of the required adjustment—slowing GDP growth to a below-potential pace and rebalancing supply and demand in the labor market—have been remarkable and underappreciated successes so far.

GDP growth is on track to slow from 5.7% in 2021 (Q4/Q4) to 0.3% in 2022. This means that fiscal and monetary policy tightening has so far managed to slow demand growth sharply without accidentally overdoing it and sparking a recession, an impressive achievement.

Both the speed and the composition of <u>labor market adjustment</u> have also been very favorable so far, as shown in Exhibit 1. Our jobs-workers gap has closed 40% of the amount we estimate is required in just half a year. Moreover, all of the decline in labor demand has come from a decline in job openings—a decline that is now more than twice as large as any decline seen before in US history outside a recession—and none of it has come from a decline in employment. While we certainly don't expect this ratio to persist forever and do expect the unemployment rate to rise eventually, for now timelier measures of job openings are still falling and the layoff rate is still very low.

That said, it would be premature to say that the risk that a recession will ultimately prove necessary to solve the inflation problem has fallen by more than a little until we see clear and consistent evidence that labor market rebalancing is translating to slower wage growth and beginning to break the wage-price feedback loop. With wage growth still running 2pp too high, measures of the underlying inflation trend still far above target, and short-term inflation expectations still elevated, this risk remains serious.

Exhibit 1: Both the Speed and Composition of Labor Market Adjustment Have Been Very Favorable So Far



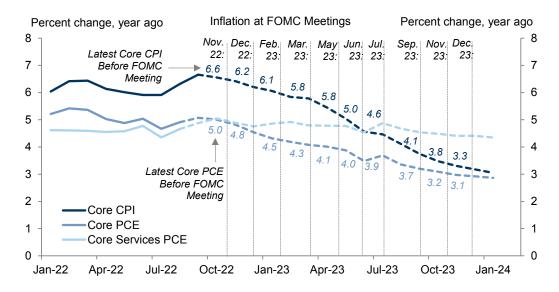
Source: Goldman Sachs Global Investment Research, Department of Labor

The second risk, that the Fed will raise the funds rate enough to cause a recession that is not necessary, has likely increased somewhat. The main reason is that it is increasingly clear that shelter and health care inflation—and by extension measures of the underlying inflation trend that Fed officials monitor—are likely to remain uncomfortably high throughout 2023 and would even if the labor market somehow rebalanced tomorrow. While we expect inflation to fall substantially next year, this comes mostly from goods rather than services in our forecast, as shown in Exhibit 2, and Fed officials appear reluctant to highlight the part of the inflation basket that is less persistent and less driven by monetary policy (albeit better measured).

In an uncomfortable inflation environment, continuing to hike for quite a while longer could become the path of least resistance if going through an FOMC meeting without hiking is too difficult. Too great a focus on lagging indicators, too little patience, or tightening too quickly to gauge the impact on the economy in real time could result in a recession that is not entirely intended.

While this is a risk, the majority of FOMC participants have said that the appropriate hawkish response to high inflation is to get the funds rate to a sufficiently restrictive level and hold it there, not to hike indefinitely. The FOMC has an inflation forecast similar to ours for 2023, so an inflation outcome like the one we expect should not be a surprise, and Fed officials would likely be comfortable pointing to the recent decline in new lease rent inflation, if it persists. If the FOMC does hike for longer than it currently plans, if this means moving in 25bp increments, we would see less risk of accidentally overdoing it.

Exhibit 2: Inflation Will Remain Uncomfortably High Next Year, Especially Core Services Inflation, and We See Some Risk That the FOMC Will Feel Obligated to Keep Hiking for Too Long in Response



Source: Goldman Sachs Global Investment Research

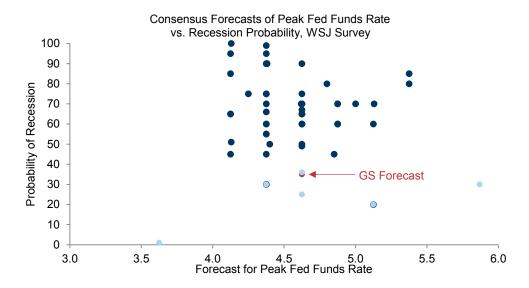
The third risk, that an unforeseen factor will cause a recession, is probably somewhat higher than usual. We doubt the global growth slowdown is enough to tip the US economy into recession, in part because Fed officials will surely incorporate estimates of <u>foreign spillovers</u> to the US in their economic forecasts and aim to set policy accordingly. But potential disturbances from global market developments are more unpredictable and probably more likely at a time of rapid global central bank tightening, and geopolitical risks with the potential to be economically significant are also higher than usual.

Our 35% odds of recession over the next 12 months are roughly triple the unconditional average recession probability for a typical year in recent decades, but they are lower than the 63% consensus odds in the latest *Wall Street Journal* survey.

One aspect of the consensus forecast that we are particularly skeptical of is the implicit view that rate hikes of the size we expect or just a bit larger will be enough to cause a recession. As the dark blue dots in Exhibit 3 show, among forecasters with higher recessions odds than our own, the average peak funds rate forecast is actually slightly lower than ours and only two out of fifty have a peak funds rate forecast that is even 75bp higher. While we could certainly imagine the Fed hiking enough to cause a recession next year, we think it would require larger rate hikes than most forecasters currently anticipate.

We suspect that many other forecasters base their view on an expectation that the "long and variable lags" of monetary policy have not yet had their peak effect. In contrast, our financial conditions index (FCI) framework suggests that the drag on GDP growth from FCI tightening is already at its peak.

Exhibit 3: While Most Forecasters Whose Recession Odds Are Much Higher Than Ours Have Similar Fed Forecasts, We Are Skeptical That Rate Hikes of Roughly That Size Will Be Enough to Cause a Recession



Source: Wall Street Journal, Goldman Sachs Global Investment Research

What would make us raise our recessions odds meaningfully? We would raise our odds that a recession will prove necessary if the benign labor market adjustment stops or reverses, if ongoing labor market rebalancing fails to bring down wage growth, or if external events such as another large increase in energy prices push up inflation expectations and make the Fed's challenge even harder. We would raise our odds of the Fed causing a recession unnecessarily if more FOMC participants start to signal that they think ongoing rate hikes of at least 50bp are appropriate until inflation comes down meaningfully. And we would be most likely to raise our odds of developments other than Fed tightening causing a recession if they first caused a large spike in US financial conditions.

## **David Mericle**

# Disclosure Appendix

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