

## US MACRO UPDATE

## HOUSING MARKET SEES A SHARP REVERSAL OF FORTUNE

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## SUMMARY

- > The US housing market went through a mini-boom in 2020-21 on account of demand for additional space during the period of Covid restrictions coupled with easy money from the Federal Reserve. This was in spite of sharply-rising costs and acute bottlenecks in workers and materials availability.
- > This period has now ended: housing activity is falling as the Fed gets aggressive with rate hikes to combat high inflation, while the latest surge in prices has led to buyer caution.
- > Recent housing-related surveys, in particular homebuilders' surveys, suggest more weakness is likely in the coming months.
- > US housing is not as financialised and globally interlinked as it was during the subprime crisis of 2008 and the global financial risks are perhaps not as dire as then.
- > A shortage of housing stock provides a cushion for prices to some degree, but this could disappear rapidly should housing slow more profoundly.
- > A slowdown in the US housing sector, which represents 5% of GDP (but more when counting for spillovers) is one of the forces along with an inventory reversal and plunging capex (business investment) that may tip the US economy into mild recession, in our view.
- > A mild recession (official, as per the National Bureau of Economic Research) from Q1 2023 is still our main scenario with our 2023 GDP forecast at -0.4%. Risk is that recession could come earlier than Q1 2023, and could be deeper especially if private consumption is affected, for instance by tighter access to consumer credit.

CHART 1: MORTGAGE ORIGATION FOR HOUSE PURCHASES IS SLIDING SHARPLY



Source: Pictet Wealth Management, Bloomberg Finance LP (as of 21 July 2022)

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#### Sharp reversal of fortune as Federal Reserve gets aggressive

The US housing market is rapidly transitioning from robustness (if not exuberance) last year to softness this year, with this mirroring the equally **rapid hawkish pivot of the Federal Reserve** over the past few months. According to Bankrate data, the 30-year mortgage rate – the standard mortgage product in the US – touched a multi-year high of 6.04% of 21 June, almost double the rate of 3.1% it experienced on average during 2020-21.

This **steep rise in financing costs**, combined with the **rapid ascent in house prices** (particularly over the past two years) has led to a sharp drop in housing affordability indices. Buyers have thinned out lately. In fact, the National Association of Realtors' **index for affordability collapsed** in May to the lowest level since July 2006. House prices were still up 13.4% year-on-year based on the average sale as of June 2022; in fact, average prices rose to a record high of USD 416,000 per home in June. House prices are up 14.7% on average so far this year (January to June), after rising 17.9% in 2021, far outstripping general inflation, rents or median wage gains. The outcome can be seen in the June National Association of Homebuilders (NAHB) sub-index of 'prospective buyers' which is collapsing, ex-Covid episode, to the lowest level since March 2015. This series, which starts in 1985, had seen a record high in November 2020.

The low level of available housing stock has long helped to support the sector, and notably so over the past two years. Recent data suggest that supply of housing is still limited, with home-for-sales inventory at 1.26mn in June, well below a 3-year average of 1.56mn. This could act as a cushion as the sector weakens. Nevertheless, we would caution from extrapolating too much from the strength of this theoretical cushion, as housing supply can rise very sharply (reversals in housing inventory can be swift).

While we expect additional weakness for the sector, **we do not necessarily think that the parallels to the subprime crisis are especially relevant** since the banking sector tightened lending standards after the global financial crisis, and many housing-related credit products have been discontinued, for instance home-equity lines of credit (HELOC). In fact, outstanding stock of HELOC debt was USD 261bn as of Q1 2023 – the lowest level since Q4 2002 – versus a peak of USD 674bn in Q1 2009, according to Federal Deposit Insurance Corp. data. That said, it is true that much mortgage funding and origination has escaped into the 'shadow' banking sector (or 'non-bank' financial sector) in recent years, where regulations are lighter and data scarcer.

In a March 2022 speech, Federal Reserve Governor Chris Waller highlighted that this time around, and unlike pre-2008, the housing sector now is not driven by "excessive leverage, looser underwriting standards or financial speculation". **Waller highlighted that households' balance sheets are "stronger" now with both banks and households better able to cope with the possibility of falling home prices.**

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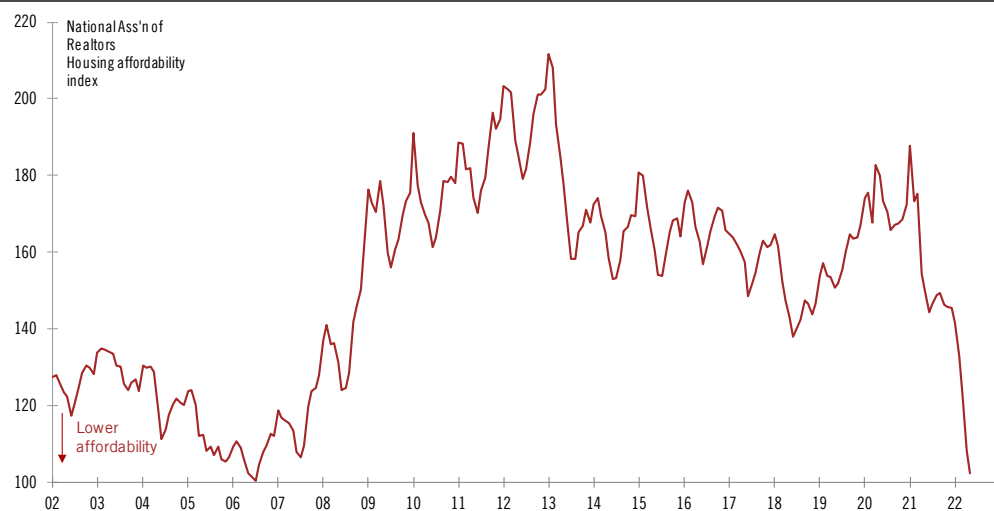
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From a GDP point of view, we currently forecast a drop of 3.7% in 2022 for residential investment, followed by another drop of 3.9% in 2023 (for comparison, the category rose 6.8% in 2020 and 9.2% in 2021). We reckon that **risks to these forecasts are mostly to the downside**, especially as entering a mild recession could have a much bigger psychological impact on house buyers, leading to more undershooting in housing activity. Much will also depend on the **adjustment in the labour market**: for now we expect only a moderate deterioration in the unemployment rate.

Overall, our macro scenario for the US economy remains a **mild recession** starting in Q1 2023. Our 2023 GDP growth forecast is -0.4%. The risk to this forecast is to the downside. The main reason for this recession, in our view, is the **sharp reversal in policymaking this year**, and particularly the sharp tightening in monetary policy (with massive impact on broader financial conditions) as well as the 'sudden stop' in budget support after sizeable largesse in 2020-21. Furthermore, the cycle is amplified by **sharp swings in the industrial inventory cycle**. The US economy may also suffer from **global headwinds**, in particular linked to the fragile energy situation in Europe and the zero-covid policy in China.

CHART 2: US HOUSING AFFORDABILITY HAS DETERIORATED SHARPLY



Source: Pictet Wealth Management, Bloomberg Finance LP (as of 21 July 2022)

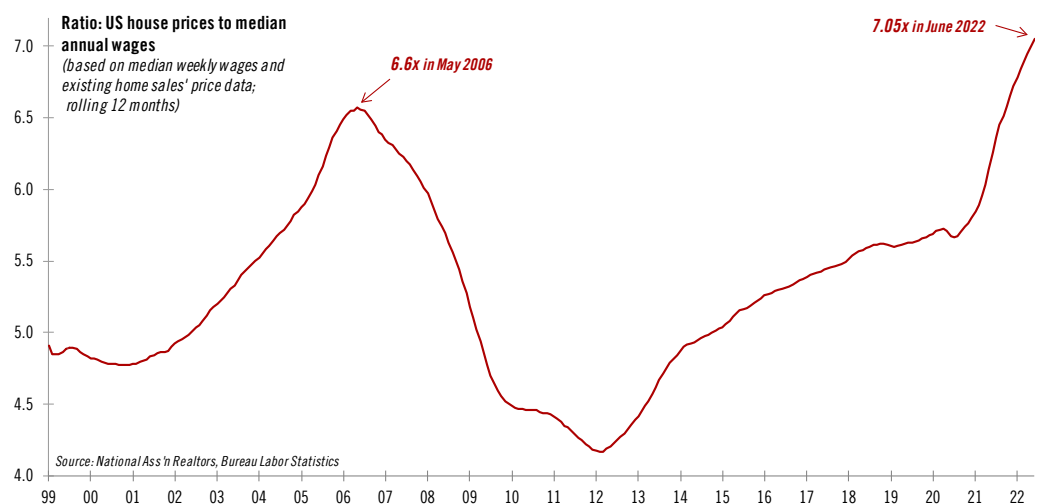
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From a Federal Reserve perspective, **we do not think the ongoing weakness in the housing sector will provoke a near-term halt to its monetary tightening.** The Fed's focus remains very much on tackling high inflation and recent statistics (9.1% CPI in June) are still likely to cause anxiety. **From a growth perspective, the Fed is very much watching labour-market signals more than other data points** (including GDP), and payrolls continue to have positive momentum – at least for now. To some degree, the Fed may be welcoming the 'deflating' of the US housing sector. Nevertheless, there remains a **risk that the Fed may overdo it** with its tight policy and that inertia in the housing sector may mean weakness self-perpetuates more than the Fed expects, including for 'collective psychology' reasons. We will watch Fed policy (as well as balance sheet policy) in the coming months closely in that regard. Our central scenario is still that the Fed will pause rate hikes by year's end as inflation slows and recession risks mount.

CHART 3: US HOUSES ARE RICHLY VALUED VERSUS CURRENT MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOMES



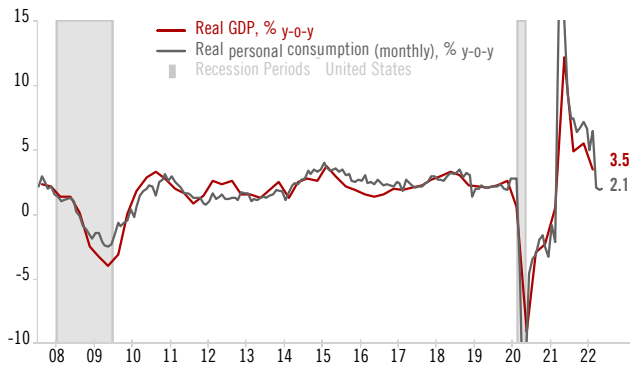
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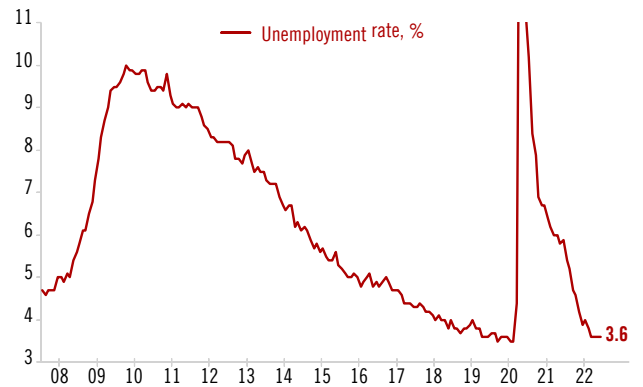
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REAL GDP AND PRIVATE CONSUMPTION GROWTH, % Y-O-Y



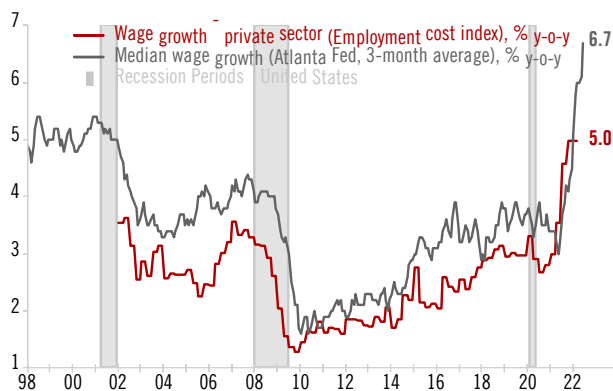
Source: Pictet WM – AA&MR, Factset

UNEMPLOYMENT RATE, %



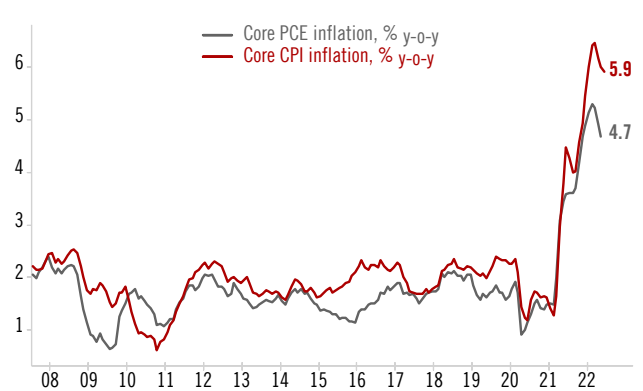
Source: Pictet WM – AA&MR, Factset

WAGE GROWTH INDICATORS, % Y-O-Y



Source: Pictet WM – AA&MR, Factset

CORE INFLATION (PCE AND CPI INDICES), % Y-O-Y



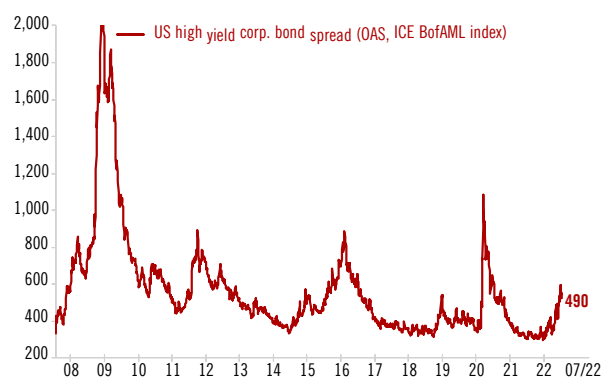
Source: Pictet WM – AA&MR, Factset

ISM BUSINESS SURVEYS



Source: Pictet WM – AA&MR, Factset

HIGH-YIELD CORPORATE BOND SPREAD, BASIS POINTS



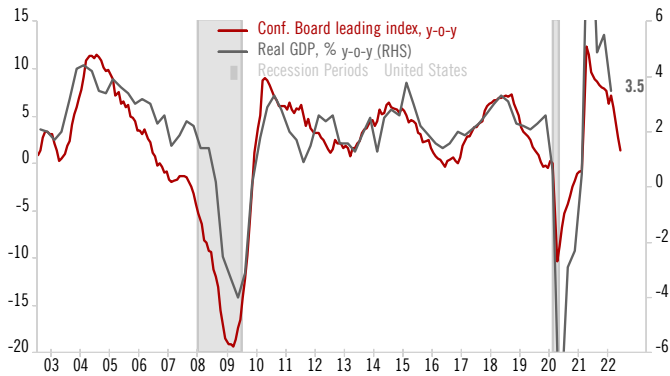
Source: Pictet WM – AA&MR, Factset (last close)

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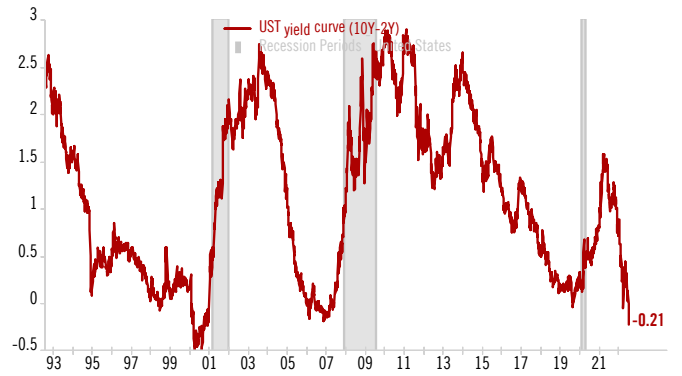
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CONF. BOARD LEADING INDEX, % Y-O-Y VS GDP GROWTH, % Y-O-Y



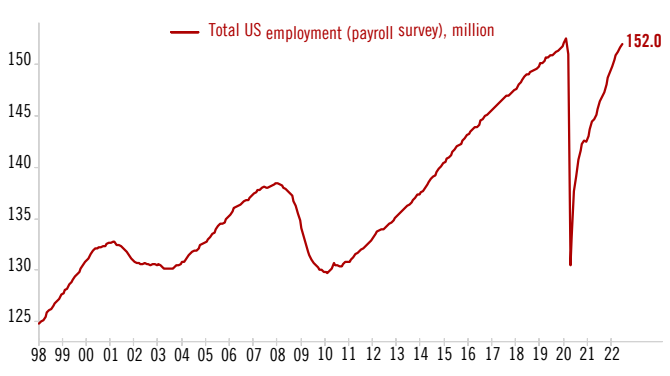
Source: PWM - AA&MR, Factset

US YIELD CURVE SPREAD (10-YEAR YIELD MINUS 2-YEAR YIELD)



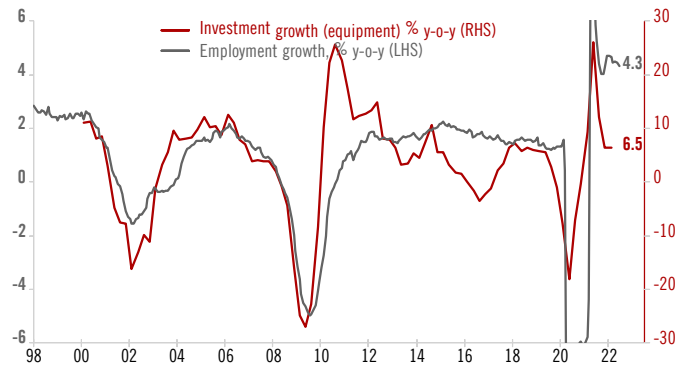
Source: PWM - AA&MR, Factset (last close)

TOTAL US EMPLOYMENT



Source: PWM - AA&MR, Factset

US INVESTMENT (EQUIPMENT) VS EMPLOYMENT GROWTH, % Y-O-Y



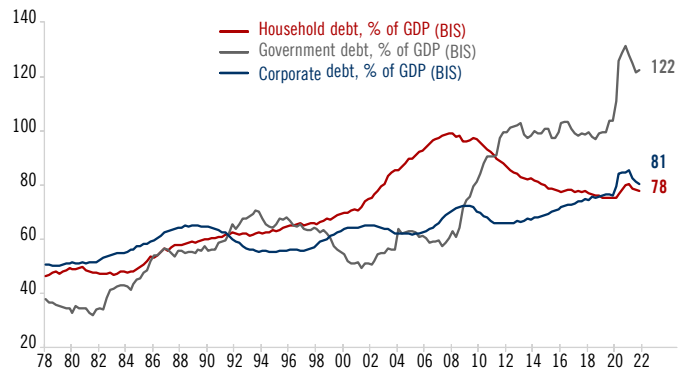
Source: PWM - AA&MR, Factset

EXISTING HOME SALES, MILLION UNITS (ANNUALISED)



Source: PWM - AA&MR, Factset

DEBT RATIOS (HOUSEHOLD, CORPORATE, GOVERNMENT), % OF GDP



Source: PWM - AA&MR, Factset

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