

Weekly Market Commentary

November 22, 2021

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Households may be unhappy about a number of things – high inflation, dissatisfaction with government and product shortages, to name a few – but they appear to be consoling themselves by buying stuff. To be sure, the increasingly grimmer mindset of households – as manifested by plummeting sentiment readings – juxtaposed with freewheeling spending is another example of people acting differently from the way they feel. This is a time-honored conflict that is fodder for behavioral economists, but toxic for policymakers who rely on rational models for decision-making purposes. The Federal Reserve is an avid data cruncher; it is also keenly sensitive to how people feel, particularly with regards to purchasing plans and inflation.

Odds are inflation and product shortages – two contributors to the downbeat mood of households – are more important factors influencing spending than the urge to compensate for inconsolable feelings. Importantly, the inflation influence has two components, each of which portends a different future. If consumers are buying more things before they become even more expensive down the road, that could jump-start a dangerous inflationary cycle built on heightened inflationary expectations. That's something the Fed would likely respond to, but the evidence so far is that household inflation expectations have risen modestly over the short-term, likely reflecting this year's inflation surge, but remain well anchored over the longer term – a backdrop that should not elicit a knee jerk reaction from the Fed.

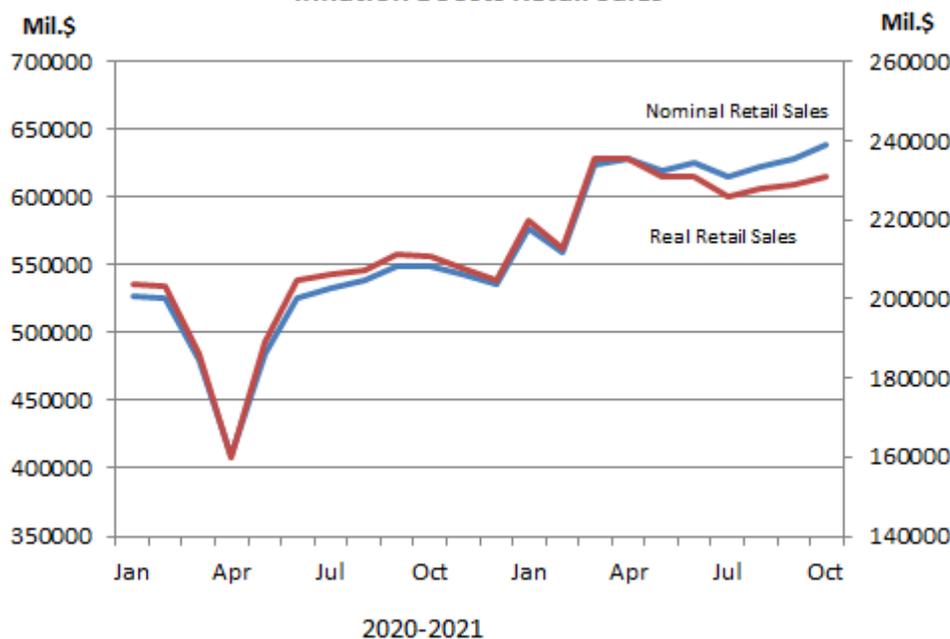
Conversely, the other inflation influence is probably having a greater impact on household psychology, namely its negative impact on purchasing power. Consumers are spending more on goods and services, but a good portion of the increase reflects higher prices. While retail sales for October came in way above expectations, surging by 1.7 percent, more than double the consensus forecast, so too did consumer prices that month, which ate up more than half the nominal increase in sales. No doubt, the healthy financial condition of households, flush with more than \$2 trillion in excess savings, made them more willing to accept higher prices. But those funds are rapidly depleting (the personal savings rate fell to its pre-pandemic level of 7.5 percent in September) and a growing swath of the population reports that higher prices are becoming more of a deterrent than incentive to spend.

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Inflation Boosts Retail Sales

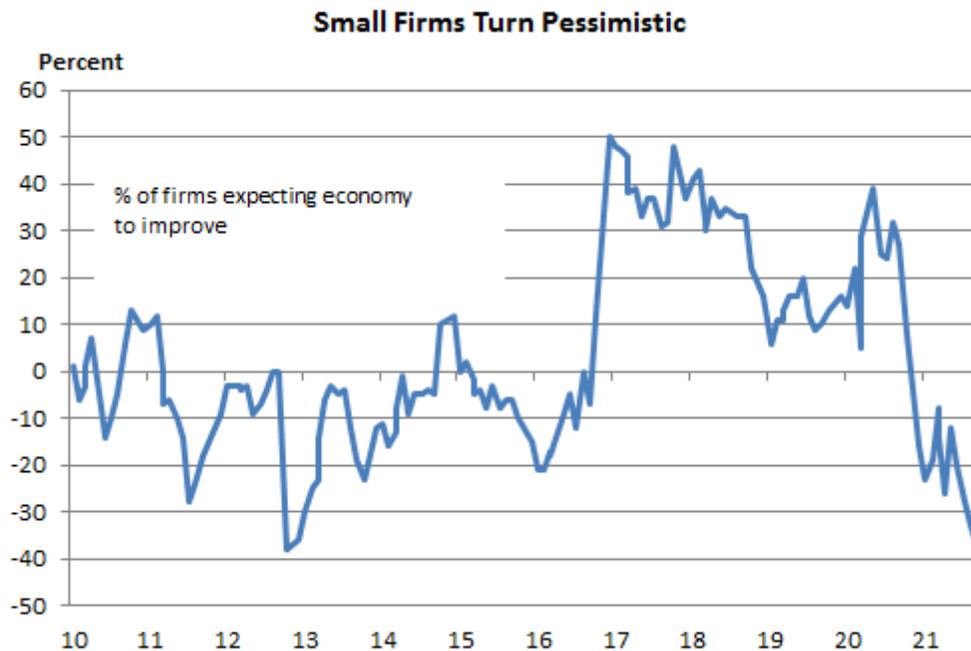


But while inflation’s impact on spending may be ambiguous at this juncture, the product shortages stemming from the myriad supply-chain disruptions are prompting more consumers to shop ahead of the holiday gift-giving season. To what extent early shopping added fluff to the October’s retail sales report is hard to measure. But the drumbeat of media reports suggesting that shelves might be bare in the weeks leading up to Christmas are undoubtedly having an effect. Among the strongest sales gains in October were for goods typically purchased during the holidays – at electronics and appliance stores (+3.8%) and for sports, hobbies, books and music (1.5% following an outsized 4.5% increase in September). Lingering health concerns (i.e., the Delta variant) no doubt prompted many individuals to eschew shopping at stores and purchase goods on the internet; online sales jumped by a robust 4.0 percent in October.

Importantly, the urge to shop early is not an unambiguous positive for holiday sales. To the extent consumers are pulling forward purchases to avoid shortages, some payback in subsequent months could be expected. And, given that the seasonal pattern of sales points to strong increases in November and December, any shortfall in demand due to payback from early shopping would translate into weak sales reports for those months on a seasonally adjusted basis. Likewise, there could be a whipsaw effect on inflation. By adding to demand pressures, the early shoppers are amplifying the demand/supply mismatch and contributing to the ongoing inflation surge. But if there is a significant payback and demand slumps in coming months, stores will be stuck with unsold goods, which could lead to price cuts.

In this regard, it is noteworthy that a number of high-profile sellers, including Target, TJ Maxx and Home Depot, announced this week that they have plenty of inventory to satisfy customers. These along with a number of other large, well-funded, firms are able to circumvent the container shortage and bottlenecks at major ports by chartering their own ships and offloading goods at less congested docking stations.

Unfortunately, small firms do not have the financial resources to pull this off, putting them at an even greater disadvantage in coping with the myriad headwinds they face. In addition to the inability to stock goods, these firms are either unable to find workers to fill open positions or can't afford to pay the higher wages that are needed to attract them. Not surprisingly, small firms are turning more pessimistic about the future. According to the latest survey by the NFIB, the share of small businesses expecting a better economy fell to the lowest level since 2012 in October.

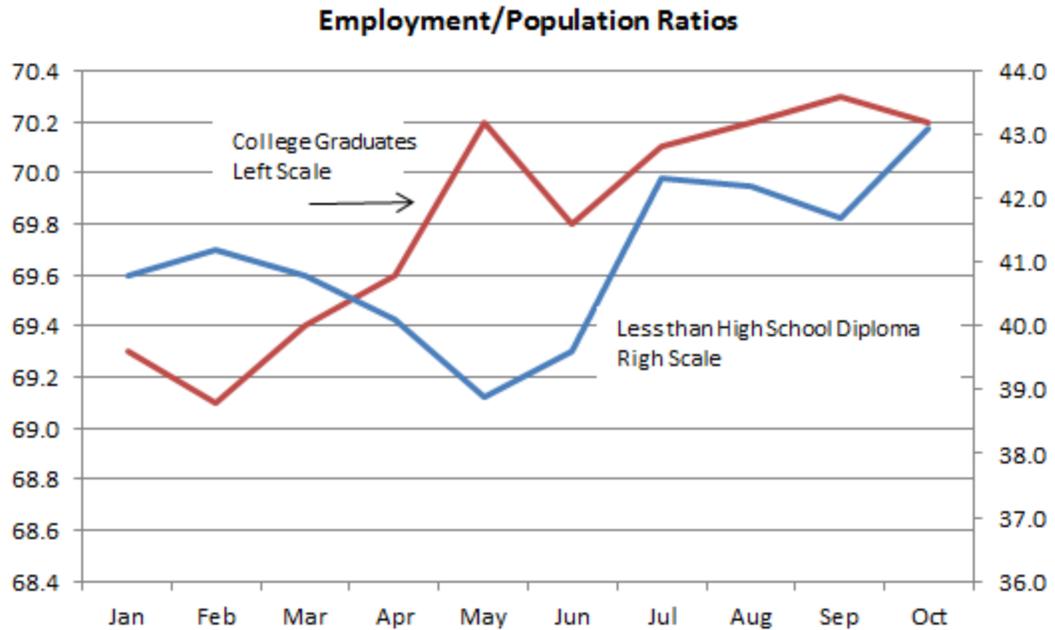


With regards to workers, Fed Chair Powell is correct that there is still a lot of ground to make up before the labor force reaches maximum employment. What he is referring to are the more than four million jobs still missing from the 22.3 million that were lost during the worst of the pandemic last March and April. Other measures that also point to a less than full recovery in the job market include a labor force participation rate and the employment to population ratio, both of which are well below pre-pandemic levels. Powell is hesitant to take more drastic policy measures to stifle inflation in good part out of fear that they would choke off the jobs recovery before the missing jobs are recovered. Most workers on the sidelines are low-paid, unskilled workers who are better able to find positions when the job market is running hot.

That said, workers are also falling behind the inflation curve, which highlights the conundrum the Fed is dealing with. True, wage growth has accelerated markedly as companies compete fiercely in a labor market that features more job openings than unemployed workers. However, inflation has raced ahead even faster, resulting in declining real wages. The good news is that low-paid workers are obtaining the strongest wage gains. In some instances, such as in the leisure and hospitality sector, the increases are far outstripping inflation. The bad news is that these workers are quitting their jobs in droves to obtain better positions elsewhere. This record-high quit rate is putting more upward pressure on labor costs, but also imparts more of a squeeze on small businesses.

Some believe accelerated wage gains amid a tightening job market threaten to bring about a wage-price spiral that will ultimately force the Fed to slam on the brakes, inducing a recession. From our lens, the lopsided mix of wage increases reflects a releveling of earnings for low-paid workers who have long been left behind rather than a sustained upward shift in pay raises for most workers. According to the Atlanta Fed's wage tracker, the median wage growth for workers in the upper brackets has actually declined this year. For the highest earners, wages have increased by 2.7 percent over the past twelve months, the slowest since 2015.

Just as encouraging as the faster wage increases for low-paid workers is that over the past six months less educated workers are joining the ranks of the employed at a faster rate than educated workers. To be sure, less educated and low-paid workers generally fall in the same category, so the two trends would logically be linked. But the faster pace of employment gains for less educated workers hints at a more important trend that may be unfolding. Simply put, it may reflect a lowering of educational standards for companies that would otherwise require a college degree for employment. If, in fact, the tightening labor market were leading to a broad rethinking of educational standards among businesses, it would open the door for millions of workers who would otherwise be stuck on the sidelines or in low-paying jobs.



This encouraging prospect argues for a more patient Fed than otherwise as it strives to see how events on the inflation and employment fronts unfold. Still, the reality is that high inflation is the uppermost issue of the day, and there's a growing risk that it will persist beyond the Fed's comfort level, resulting in a swifter withdrawal of monetary support than is currently planned. Indeed, the financial market is already pricing in more rate hikes next year than the one increase the Fed planned at its last policy meeting. It will be interesting to see if the policy statement at the next FOMC meeting on December 14-15 veers away from that plan.