



Burgundy Book

A report on economic conditions in the Little Rock zone

Second Quarter 2016

The Little Rock zone of the Federal Reserve comprises the majority of Arkansas, except northeast Arkansas. The total population is approximately 2.5 million people, including the 710,000 who live in the Little Rock MSA.

Vibrant Labor Markets Trigger Some Upward Pressure on Wage Growth

By Kevin L. Kliesen, *Business Economist and Research Officer*

The near-term outlook improved slightly according to a May survey of business contacts. Still, the vast majority (69 percent) expect that conditions in 2016 will be about the same as last year.

As suggested by the zone's low unemployment rate in the first quarter (4.1 percent), labor market conditions remain vibrant in most areas. For example, the Fayetteville MSA's unemployment rate was 2.9 percent in the first quarter, its lowest rate in 15 years.

Measured from a year earlier, payroll employment growth was stronger than the nation's growth in the Fayetteville and Texarkana MSAs. Anecdotal evidence suggests mounting upward pressure on nominal wage growth.

Measures of housing activity were mostly good across the zone in the first quarter. Measured from a year earlier, single-family building permits were up in four of the six MSAs, while house prices were up in five of the six MSAs. In the Little Rock MSA, office rents rose at their fastest rate in five years.

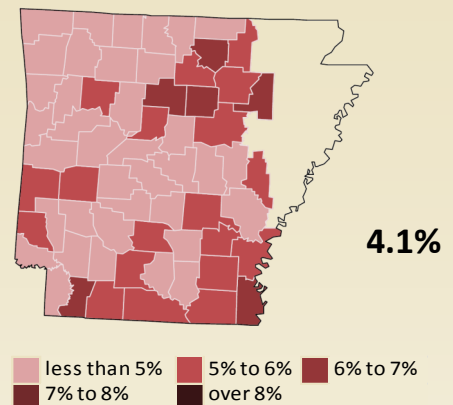
Growth of household credit card balances accelerated modestly in the first quarter compared with three months earlier, while credit card and automotive loan delinquency rates edged higher.

In the first quarter, return on average assets at Arkansas commercial banks rose to its highest level since 1998. Bankers reported that loan demand in the third quarter of 2016 is expected to be unchanged from a year earlier.

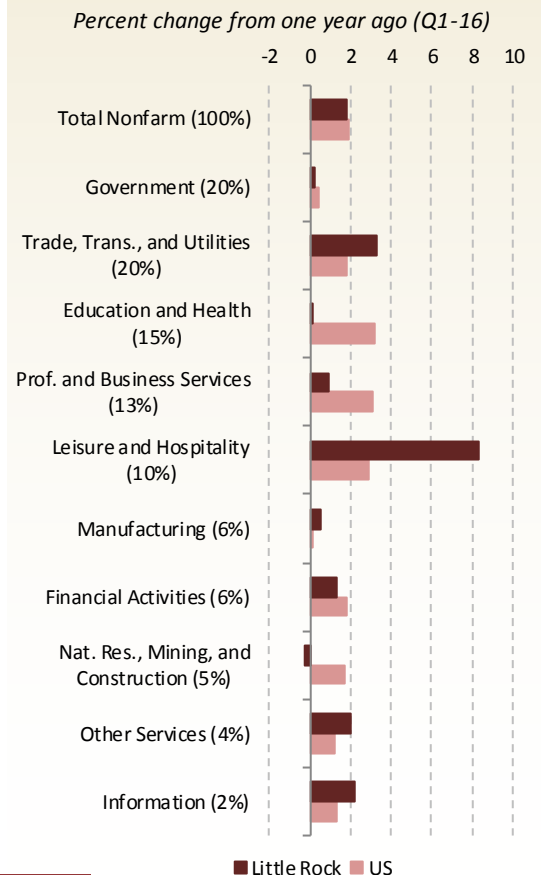
Arkansas farmers nearly doubled their planted corn and cotton acreage this year relative to 2015, while significantly reducing their planted acreage of soybeans and sorghum.

Data Snapshot

County unemployment rates (SA, Q1-16)



Nonfarm payroll employment by industry



How to read this report

Unless otherwise noted, **city names** refer to the metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs), which are geographic areas that include cities and their surrounding suburbs, as defined by the Census Bureau.

Statistics for the Little Rock zone are based on data availability and are calculated as weighted averages of either the 62 counties in the zone or the six MSAs. As of 2012, approximately 74 percent of the zone’s labor force was located in an MSA. Specifically: 29 percent in Little Rock, 20 percent in Fayetteville, 11 percent in Fort Smith, 6 percent in Texarkana, 4 percent in Pine Bluff, and 4 percent in Hot Springs; 26 percent of the zone’s labor force was located in non-metropolitan areas.

Arrows in the tables are used to identify significant trends in the data. The direction of the arrow indicates the sign (up/down) and the color indicates the economic significance (green = good, red = poor). Arrows appear only when the change from the previous quarter is greater than 1 standard deviation. For example, the standard deviation of the change in the U.S. unemployment rate is 0.4 percent. If the U.S. unemployment rate declined from 8.4 percent to 8.2 percent, no arrow would appear; but if it declined from 8.4 percent to 7.9 percent, a green down arrow would appear in the table.

Selected **variable definitions** are located in the appendix.

Selected quotes from business contacts are generally verbatim, but some are lightly edited to improve readability.

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Join Our Panel of Business Contacts

The anecdotal information in this report was provided by our panel of business contacts, who were surveyed between May 3 and May 17.

If you’re interested in becoming a member of our panel, follow this link to complete a trial survey:

<http://research.stlouisfed.org/outlooksurvey/>

or email us at beigebook@stls.frb.org.

Views expressed do not necessarily reflect official positions of the Federal Reserve System.

Unemployment Rates Significantly Lower, Private Services Driving Growth in Zone

By Maria A. Arias, Senior Research Associate

“Employment increases were driven by growth in retail, professional services, and health and education sectors.”

—Northwest Arkansas area contact

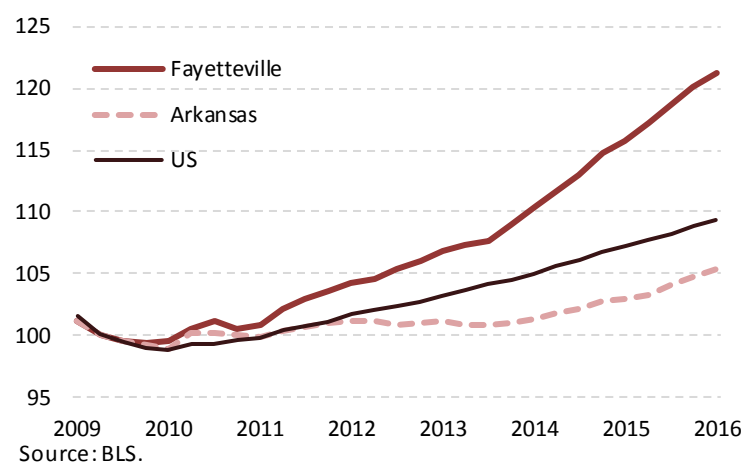
“Salaries have increased in parallel with cost of living; however, drivers and technical employees are often paid more due to challenges with recruitment and retention of these skilled employees.”

—Little Rock area contact

- Overall labor market conditions in the Little Rock zone were positive during the first quarter. Employment growth in all MSAs was slightly higher than at the end of 2015, with most gains coming from stronger growth in the service-providing sectors. However, employment growth in Little Rock and Fort Smith remains below the national average (see table).
- In Fayetteville, the fastest growing MSA in the zone, employment growth has been at least twice the national rate since early 2014 (see figure). The largest job gains have come from the professional and business services and the trade, transportation, and utilities sectors. Together, these sectors contributed over half of the total job gains in the area.
- The unemployment rates across the zone were significantly lower than in the previous quarter. From a year ago, declines in the jobless rate ranged from 1.5 percentage points in Little Rock to 1 percent in Texarkana, compared with a 0.6 percent decline nationwide.
- Anecdotal evidence suggests the tightening labor market is having an effect on wages: Over half of hiring managers surveyed reported increasing wages and salaries to attract and retain employees. Contacts continued to report having trouble finding applicants with specific skills or experience to fill job vacancies.

Employment in Fayetteville 20 percent higher than in 2009

Nonfarm payroll employment, SA (Index 2009=100)



	Little Rock	Fayetteville	Fort Smith	Texarkana	US
Unemployment rate (Q1-16) (%)	3.6 ▼	2.9 ▼	4.6 ▼	4.4 ▼	4.9
Nonfarm employment (Q1-16)	1.8	4.8	0.4	2.4	1.9
Goods-producing sector	0.2	-1.0 ▼	-3.0	2.6	0.7
Private service-providing sector	2.6	6.5	0.9	3.3	2.5
Government sector	0.2	3.1	2.9	-0.5	0.5

Note: Unless otherwise noted, values are percent change from one year ago. Arrows indicate a significant (± 1 standard deviation) change from the previous quarter. See appendix for notes and sources.

Manufacturing Slows, Transportation Accelerates in Little Rock Zone

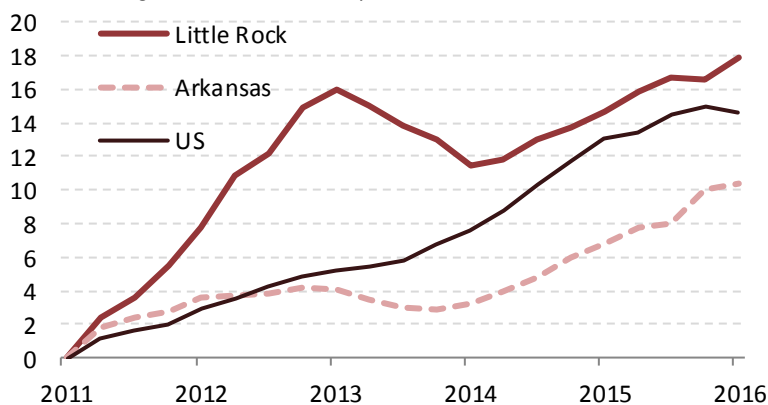
By Daniel Eubanks, Senior Research Associate

“We are expecting a slight decrease in tonnage and shipping during the second half of the year.”

– Little Rock area transportation executive

Faster growth in Q1 pushes Little Rock transportation sector farther ahead of Arkansas and US

Cumulative growth since 2011 Q1, percent



Source: BLS.

- Transportation employment growth accelerated slightly in the Little Rock MSA in the first quarter, while growth slowed in Fayetteville and in Arkansas as a whole, mirroring the slowdown in transportation nationwide. In the past five years, the transportation sector has grown 18 percent in Little Rock, compared with 10 percent in Arkansas and 15 percent in the U.S. as a whole (see figure).
- Despite the faster employment growth, there is some weakness as some industry contacts expect a decrease in shipping tonnage (see quote).
- Manufacturing employment continued to decline in Arkansas. Slight growth in the nondurable goods sector was offset by declines in the durable goods sector. In the Fayetteville MSA, manufacturing employment declined at a significantly faster rate than in the previous quarter.
- Although manufacturing exports from Arkansas continued to decline in the first quarter, the pace of the decline slowed significantly from 25.1 percent in the fourth quarter to 6.3 percent in the first quarter. Much of the improvement comes from increased exports of transportation equipment. In the fourth quarter of 2015, exports of transportation equipment were down 36 percent from one year ago, while in the first quarter of 2016, exports of transportation equipment were up 54 percent from one year ago.

	Little Rock	Fayetteville	Arkansas	US
Transportation employment (Q1-16)	2.8	4.9	3.3	1.4 ▼
Manufacturing employment (Q1-16)	0.5	-4.2 ▼	-1.2	0.1
Durable goods	--	--	-3.2	-0.5
Nondurable goods	--	--	0.8	1.1
Manufacturing exports (Q1-16)	--	--	-6.3 ▲	-5.7

Note: Values are percent change from one year ago. Arrows indicate a significant (± 1 standard deviation) change from the previous quarter; see appendix for notes and sources.

Home Sales Continue To Strengthen; Growth of Office Asking Rent Increases

By Joseph McGillicuddy, Senior Research Associate

“Speculative home building is still very low.”

—Little Rock real estate contact

“Multi-family developers continue to look for new sites to build apartment complexes in the Little Rock area.”

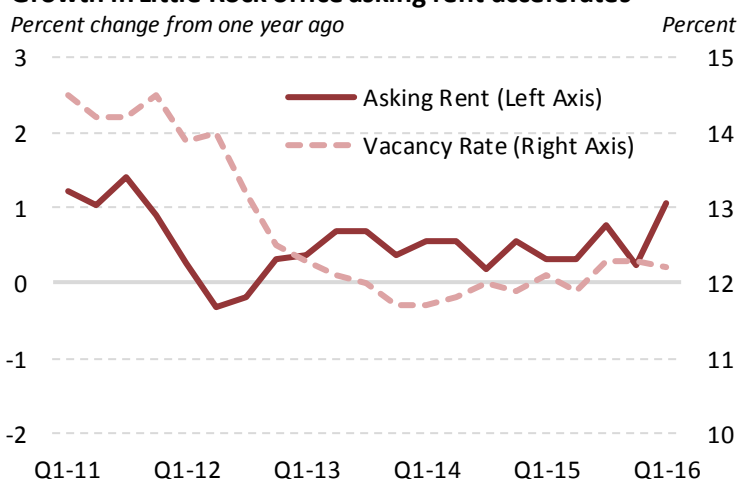
—Little Rock real estate contact

“The office market continues to tighten.”

—Little Rock real estate contact

- Residential activity improved modestly in the first quarter of 2016. Year-to-date home sales in Little Rock were up 12.7 percent. However, home prices have remained relatively flat across most MSAs.
- Residential construction activity has been generally positive. Building permits were up compared with a year ago in most MSAs. A local contact indicated that speculative home building has continued to be low as most builders refuse to start construction unless the house is presold.
- The apartment vacancy rate decreased from the previous reporting period. Contacts noted that multifamily developers continue to search for locations to build apartments around Little Rock.
- Retail and office vacancy rates in Little Rock remained essentially unchanged. Office rents grew at their fastest rate since 2011 (see figure) but were still well below the 3.0 percent average growth rate for the U.S.

Growth in Little Rock office asking rent accelerates



Source: Reis.

Non-residential market (Little Rock, Q1-16)	Apartment	Office	Retail	Industrial
Vacancy rate (%)	7.2	12.2	11.1	--
Asking rent Percent change from one year ago	2.8	1.1 ▲	0.9 ▼	--

Note: Apartment, office, and retail values are from Reis.com.

Residential market (Q1-16)	Little Rock	Fayetteville	Fort Smith	Hot Springs	Pine Bluff	Texarkana	US
CoreLogic Home Price Index	0.4	5.9	0.8	-1.0	3.0	0.8 ▼	6.0
Single-family building permits	10.5	32.2	-8.8	-30.0 ▼	40.0	150.0 ▲	14.1
New and existing home sales	12.7	--	--	--	--	--	4.8

Note: Sales and permits data are year-to-date percent change. Prices are percent change from one year ago. Arrows indicate a significant (±1 standard deviation) change from the previous quarter. See appendix for notes and sources.

Zone Credit Card Debt Growth Accelerates; Auto Delinquency Rate Ticks Up

By Joseph McGillicuddy, Senior Research Associate

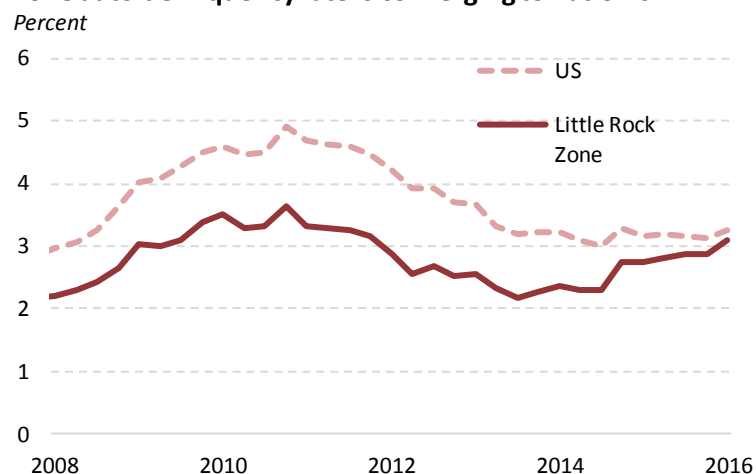
“Good weather, lower interest rates, longer terms, and lower fuel prices have positively impacted my business.”

—Conway area auto dealer

“Sales revenue is up 8 percent over the first quarter of 2015.”

—Little Rock area retail contact

Zone auto delinquency rate is converging to nation's



Source: FRBNY Consumer Credit Panel and Equifax.

- Growth of credit card debt balances per capita accelerated during the first quarter to more than double the national growth rate. This uptick in growth coincided with a slight increase in the zone's credit card delinquency rate.
- Zone households continued to increase their auto debt balances at a relatively high rate, well exceeding that of the nation. The zone's auto delinquency rate increased compared with the previous quarter and has been converging toward the nation's rate for the past several quarters (see figure).
- Households within the zone continued to unwind their mortgage debt, whereas nationally households left their mortgage debt relatively unchanged. The zone's mortgage delinquency rate dropped for the fourth consecutive quarter.
- Real income per capita growth slowed to 2.5 percent in Arkansas during the fourth quarter of 2015, dropping just below the average for the nation.

	Little Rock Zone	Arkansas	Little Rock MSA	US
Per capita personal income (Q4-15)	--	2.5	--	2.7
Per capita debt balances (Q1-16)				
Mortgage	-1.0	-0.9	-3.2	0.0
Credit card	3.4	3.1	2.2	1.5
Auto loan	9.6	9.5	8.6	7.7
90+ day delinquency rates (Q1-16) (%)				
Mortgage	1.3	1.3	1.4	1.8
Credit card	7.6	7.7	7.1	7.4
Auto loan	3.1 ▲	3.1	3.8	3.3

Note: Unless otherwise noted, values are percent change from one year ago. Arrows indicate a significant (± 1 standard deviation) change from the previous quarter. See appendix for notes and sources.

Profitability Reaches Post Recession High at Arkansas Banks

By Michelle Neely, *Economist*, and Hannah Shell, *Senior Research Associate*

“Commercial real estate lending opportunities demand longer-term financing than previously seen both in terms of amortization and term to maturity.”

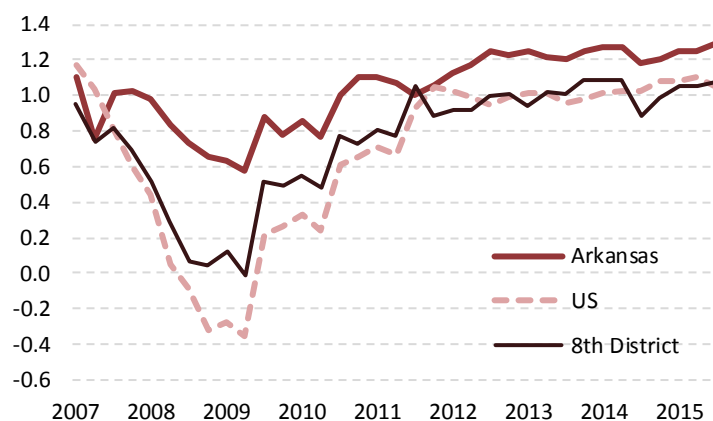
—Little Rock banker

“Competitive interest rates are appealing to most business borrowers.”

—Little Rock banker

ROA continues on upward path at Arkansas banks

Return on average assets at commercial banks, percent



Source: FRED.

- All survey respondents reported loan demand was unchanged in the second quarter compared with the same time last year. Expectations for the third quarter are mixed, with most respondents expecting loan demand to be unchanged from one year ago.
- Survey respondents expect business lending to be slightly lower in the third quarter than it was at the same time last year. For mortgage loans, half of respondents expect loan demand to be slightly higher in the third quarter.
- Return on average assets (ROA) increased 5 basis points at Arkansas banks in the first quarter, despite a 14-basis-point decline in the average net interest margin. At 1.30 percent, the average ROA at Arkansas banks is now at its highest level since 1998.
- Delinquencies on business loans were unchanged in the second quarter compared with the same period last year. Delinquencies on mortgage loans and consumer loans were slightly higher in the second quarter than they were one year ago. Respondents expect delinquencies in all loan categories to be about the same in the third quarter as they were in 2015:Q3.

Banking performance (Q1-16)

	Arkansas	8th District	US Peer Banks
Return on average assets	1.30	1.08	1.05
Net interest margin	4.10	3.70	3.79
Nonperforming loans / total loans	1.11	1.02	1.10
Loan loss reserve coverage ratio	109.91	120.59	118.18

Note: All values are percentage points. Arrows indicate a significant (± 1 standard deviation) change from the previous quarter. See appendix for notes and sources.

Acres Increases Expected for Most Crops, but Sorghum Acres Plummet

By Jonas C. Crews, *Research Associate*

“The wet spring has prevented many farmers from getting their crops planted. This has caused many who were going to plant corn to switch to soybeans.”

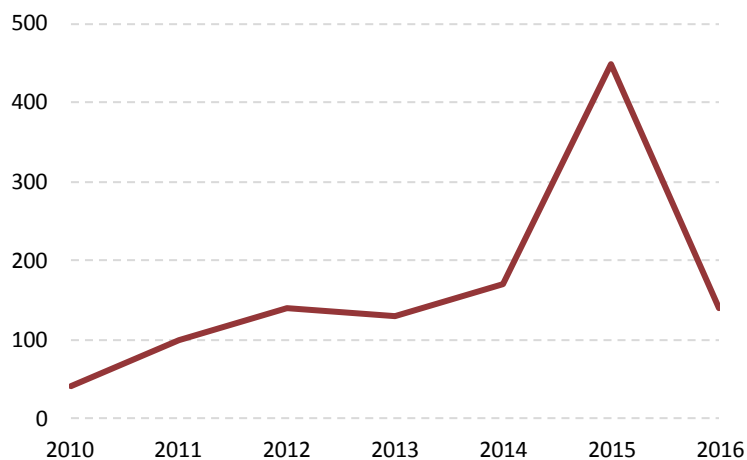
—Arkansas farmer

“Things didn’t play out the way people thought they would with soybeans last year.”

—Western Arkansas farmer

Sorghum acres fall after meteoric rise

Thousands of acres



Source: USDA-NASS.

- According to the USDA, Arkansas corn, cotton, and rice planted acreage will increase from last year, while soybean acreage will fall about 10 percent (see table). However, the size of the planned nationwide increase in corn acreage was greater than expected, which has resulted in corn prices being relatively stable while other major crops have risen in price. Coupled with the acreage shift caused by rain (see quote), the price effect is expected to result in fewer acres of corn and more acres of soybeans, a close substitute to corn, than the respective acreages provided in the USDA’s report.
- Last year’s shift to sorghum did not play out as expected (see quote). The crop’s relatively high price early in 2015 drew in farmers looking for protection from the low crop price environment, but a price drop and pest-related issues mitigated any benefits of the crop switch. Thus, after a significant increase in sorghum acreage last year, acreage has fallen back near its 2012-2014 average (see figure and table).
- While crop prices have improved, zone contacts remain adamant that prices still need to come up more to prevent a continuation of the widespread profit reductions that have occurred over the past few years.

	Arkansas	US
Natural resources (Q1-16)		
Mining and logging employment	-17.6	-16.1
Coal production	4.5	-31.2 ▼
Prospective plantings (2016)		
Corn	49.1	4.9
Cotton	43.5 ▲	0.1
Rice	9.7	5.1
Sorghum	-44.0 ▼	-8.7
Soybeans	-11.6	-2.8

Note: Values are percent change from one year ago. Arrows indicate a significant (± 1 standard deviation) change from the previous quarter. See appendix for notes and sources.

Cover Page

Sources

Bureau of Labor Statistics

Unemployment rate, nonfarm payroll employment.

Labor Markets

Table Sources

Bureau of Labor Statistics

Unemployment rate. Nonfarm employment and contributions by sector.

Notes

Goods-producing sector comprises the manufacturing and natural resources, mining, and construction sectors.

Private service-providing sector includes the following sectors: Trade, Transportation, and Utilities; Information; Financial Activities; Professional and Business Services; Education and Health Services; Leisure and Hospitality; and Other Services.

Unemployment rate data are seasonally adjusted.

Average hourly earnings are in current dollars.

Manufacturing and Transportation

Table Sources

Bureau of Labor Statistics

Transportation employment: includes transportation and warehousing industries.

Manufacturing employment: total, durable, and nondurable goods.

World Institute for Strategic Economic Research

Manufacturing exports: dollar value.

Notes

Transportation employment in Little Rock and Fayetteville covers transportation, warehousing, and utility industries. About 90 percent of the reported jobs are contributed by transportation and warehousing industries.

Manufacturing exports are defined as total dollar amount of exports by the manufacturing industries.

Durable goods manufacturing sector is defined by the Bureau of Labor Statistics as industries with a NAICS classification code of 321 (Wood Product Manufacturing); 327 (Nonmetallic Mineral Product Manufacturing); 331 (Primary Metal Manufacturing); 332 (Fabricated Metal Product Manufacturing); 333 (Machinery Manufacturing); 334 (Computer and Electronic Product Manufacturing); 335 (Electrical Equipment, Appliance, and Component Manufacturing); 336 (Transportation Equipment Manufacturing); 337 (Furniture and Related Product Manufacturing); and 339 (Misc. Manufacturing).

Nondurable goods manufacturing sector is defined by the Bureau of Labor Statistics as industries with a NAICS classification code of 311 (Food Manufacturing); 312 (Beverage and Tobacco Product Manufacturing); 313 (Textile Mills); 314 (Textile Product Mills); 315 (Apparel

Manufacturing); 316 (Leather and Allied Product Manufacturing); 322 (Paper Manufacturing); 323 (Printing and Related Support Activities); 324 (Petroleum and Coal Products Manufacturing); 325 (Chemical Manufacturing); and 326 (Plastics and Rubber Products Manufacturing).

Real Estate and Construction

Table Sources

CoreLogic

Home price index, including distressed sales.

Census Bureau

Year-to-date single-family building permits.

Janet Jones Company Realtors

Year-to-date new and existing home sales.

Notes

Asking rent is the publicized asking rent price. Data are in current dollars.

Vacancy rate is the percentage of total inventory physically vacant as of the survey date, including direct vacant and sublease space.

New and existing home sales consist of single-family home sales.

Household Sector

Table Sources

Equifax based on authors' calculations

All figures are based on a 5 percent sample of individual credit reports. Balances are geographical averages of various debt categories. The mortgage category includes first mortgages and home equity installment loans, but home equity lines of credit are omitted. Auto loans include those financed by finance company or bank loans. Credit cards are revolving accounts at banks, bankcard companies, national credit card companies, credit unions, and savings and loan associations.

Haver Analytics

Per capita income.

Notes

Delinquency rates are calculated as the percentage of payments past due by more than 90 days, weighted by the dollar value of the loan.

Banking and Finance

Table Sources

Federal Financial Institutions Examination Council

Return on average assets: USL15ROA. Net interest margin: USL15NIM. Nonperforming loans: USL15NPTL. Loan loss reserve/Total loans: USL15LLRTL. Net loan losses/Average total loans: USL15LSTL.

Note: The data available in the table can be found in FRED.

Notes

Loan loss provisions are expenses banks set aside as an allowance for bad loans.

Nonperforming loans are those loans managers classify as 90 days or more past due or nonaccrual, which means they are more likely to default.

Loan loss coverage ratio is loan loss reserves divided by nonperforming loans.

US peer banks are those commercial banks with assets of less than \$15 billion.

Due to the seasonal nature of bank return on average assets and net interest margin, the **arrows** in the table denote significant changes from one year ago.

Agriculture and Natural Resources

Sources

Energy Information Administration (EIA)

Coal production. Note: Production trends identified in report may be inconsistent with previous reports due to data revisions.

Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS)

Mining and logging employment.

United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)

Planting and prospective planting.