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From shifting household budgets to regional affordability hurdles, evolving dining habits, and even weather-strained winter sports, consumers are navigating an Olympic-sized gauntlet of economic events that are reshaping how they spend.

While consumer spending per household grew 2.6% year-over-year (YoY) – the highest pace in almost two years – middle-income households are no longer gliding – they're hitting friction. In January, these households' after-tax wage growth was 1.6% YoY, tracking below the average of 2.0% seen over the second half of 2025. Plus, the gap in spending growth between higher-income households and all others was at its largest since mid-2022. Still, jobs growth strengthened to 0.8% YoY in January, according to Bank of America internal data, and consumers have largely adapted to the squeeze on affordability so far. Tax refunds are also expected to be 25% higher this year than in 2025, which could support younger and lower-income households' spending and could further fuel savings buffers in the coming months. Read our latest Consumer Checkpoint: Weathering the storm and The Institute Employment Report: January 2026.

The scoreboard for affordability varies across the US. In the South, spending growth slowed despite the region also posting the strongest wage gains. What's the disconnect? Differences in the cost of essentials. Southern households are pulling back on travel to keep up with everyday expenses, like rent. In fact, rent growth has outpaced wage growth in the South over the past three years by a significantly wider margin than other areas, such as the Northeast. Still, median rents in the Midwest and the South remain well below the national average, and paychecks have largely kept up with spending on food in these regions. Plus, lower gas prices provide the greatest relief in regions where driving is a necessity, helping support more discretionary spending. Read publication: Regional Roundup: Mapping out affordability.

As consumers debate dining out, it's starting to look a bit like an Olympic event, where every meal choice must stick the landing. Casual dining (laidback, sit-down service places) and pizza restaurants have seen multi-year share declines within overall restaurant spending, as consumers gravitate toward eateries that offer better value, convenience, or novelty. Millennials account for the largest share of spending across all types of restaurants, but clearly tastes differ across the board – Baby Boomers account for double the share of spending at casual dining compared to fast casual spots. Interestingly, independent restaurants have shown sustained strength in spending growth relative to chains throughout the past year, especially among higher-income households. Read publication: Taste test: Where consumers are dining out.

Did you know the 2026 Winter Olympics will require more than 3 million cubic yards of artificial snow? As warming winters reshape where – and whether – snow sports happen, less snowfall, fewer skiers and higher costs are putting pressure on resorts and ski-town economies. So far this season, ski spending growth is up, but fewer households are hitting the slopes. But while winter sports face climate-driven headwinds, one thing remains constant: sports of all kinds play a major role in supporting local economies. Take football, for example. On National Football League (NFL) game days, in the ZIP codes where stadiums are located, spending rises by around 77%, with food and drinks seeing the biggest gains. Plus, more than half of businesses see increased sales and foot traffic, resulting in real revenue gains with real impact. Read publications: Under the weather: Tracking ski season and On the ball: How football fuels local spending.

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