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US Economics | North America

Employment Report Preview: Still-strong labor market

Payrolls +195k, held back by gov't, but private payrolls reaccelerate to 155k. The UE rate stalls at 4.1%. Hurricane Beryl lowers the workweek and raises AHE (+0.4%). Downside risks: Beryl, seasonals, teacher payrolls. Other topics: the benchmark revision & an update on breakeven payrolls.

Exhibit 1: July employment forecast details

Employment Report: Forecasts & Recent History						
	Est.	Consensus	Actual			
	Jul-24	Jul-24	Jun-24	May-24	3MMA	Year-Ago
Change in nonfarm payrolls (thous.)	195	188	206	218	177	184
Private payrolls	155	158	136	193	146	148
Unemployment rate (%)	4.1	4.1	4.1	4.0	3.9	3.5
Labor force participation rate (%)	62.6		62.6	62.5	62.6	62.6
Average weekly hours	34.2	34.3	34.3	34.3	34.3	34.3
Average hourly earnings (%M)	0.4	0.3	0.3	0.4	0.3	0.4
%Y	3.8		3.9	4.1	3.9	4.7

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, (BLS), Bloomberg, Morgan Stanley Research forecasts

Exhibit 2: We project payrolls slowed to 195k in July from their 222k per month average year to date



Source: BLS, Morgan Stanley Research forecasts

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July Employment

Our forecast that payrolls slow to 195k in July reflects slower public sector employment. We expect private payrolls reaccelerated from 136k in June to 155k in July, still some modest slowing from their 174k per month year-to-date average gain.

There are important downside risks from Hurricane Beryl, from seasonal factors, and from teacher employment. Hurricane Beryl interrupted activity but we expect it slowed hours more than payrolls. Seasonal factors for July have shifted since before the pandemic; we think the shifts are appropriate but if they are not, there's downside risk. We have allowed for some drag from public sector education payrolls, but it's possible that the drag is larger (or smaller).

We expect the effects of Hurricane Beryl shortened the average workweek, with a consequent (temporary) upward bias to average hourly earnings (estimated +0.4%). The unemployment rate probably moves sideways at 4.1%.

Much of June's slowdown in payrolls was convincing—a bit slower employment growth in retail and leisure after the step-down in consumer spending growth so far this year. However, professional and business services payrolls, especially for temporary employment, also slowed sharply—more than we think is consistent with signals from other labor market indicators.

Our forecast for July incorporates a range of risks: A small drag from the effects of **Hurricane Beryl** on Texas (-5k), a small drag from broader **auto-plant summer shutdowns** (-10k), a small add from nonauto manufacturing (+5k), less weakness than last month in **retail** (+8k), a rebound in **temps** (+22k), plus, in the public sector, a drag of 10k from **teachers** at the start of summer. On net, private payrolls rise slightly faster than last month, and public payrolls quite a bit slower.

While Hurricane Beryl appears to have interrupted a lot of activity around Houston and elsewhere in Texas, we think the payroll effects will be small. Power outages were as broad as after storms in the past. However, this storm hit relatively late in the payroll survey period, and many of those laid off were likely employed for part of the survey period. As yet, the rise in jobless claims in Texas has been minimal. We expect smaller payroll effects than after Harvey or the two wintertime blackouts in February 2021 and February 2011 ([Exhibit 3](#)). For scale: Texas accounts for 8.9% of national payrolls.

However, **the average workweek** probably fell as a result of the storm.

Exhibit 3: How much drag on employment in past Texas power outages?

Date	Power customers affected	New unemployment insurance claims in TX	Payrolls in TX	Hours in TX	
2-Feb-11	Broad power outages	3 mil	no change	20k below trend	-0.7
1-Sep-17	Hurricane Harvey	2 mil	+53k immediately	8k below trend	0.2
1-Feb-21	Broad power outages	4.5 mil	claims rose for 1 1/2 months by about 25k	85k below trend	-0.2
8-Jul-24	Hurricane Beryl	3 mil	+6k		

Source: Labor Department, NOAA, Morgan Stanley Research

Until the June data, retail payrolls were a quandary—strong even as retail sales were softening. But June data brought both softer retail payrolls and stronger retail sales. Payrolls and sales are now in closer accord. We still expect some slowing in retail payrolls, but not the rapid reduction reported last month.

The deceleration in leisure payrolls was also notable—slowing finally in line with the pullback in restaurant spending.

Temps were another important source of softness in June employment growth. They had been contracting at not quite their 2023 pace, falling 10k per month on average through May before swinging to a 49k decline in June. We don't think other labor indicators signal that degree of deterioration (more below).

We expect a bit of a drag in July from local education payrolls—faster education layoffs at the end of the school year after the accelerating pace of hiring early in the school year.

[Exhibit 4](#) provides a sector breakdown of job gains through June and our July forecasts.

Exhibit 4: Sectoral breakdown of payroll gains and our July forecast

monthly change, 000s	Average monthly change			Apr	May	Jun	Jul est.
	4Q 23	1Q24	2Q24				
Nonfarm	212	267	177	108	218	206	195
Private	155	203	146	108	193	136	155
Goods-producing	20	26	9	-3	12	19	18
Mining and logging	-1	0	-3	-5	-4	0	3
Construction	18	29	13	-5	16	27	15
Manufacturing	2	-3	0	7	0	-8	0
Motor veh.	3	1	4	2	5	6	
Service-producing	135	177	136	111	181	117	137
Wholesale	9	0	7	7	2	14	7
Retail	-3	20	4	14	7	-9	0
Trans. & warehousing	-12	11	13	21	12	7	13
Utilities	2	1	1	0	1	1	2
Information	1	2	3	-3	5	6	3
Financial	3	-2	6	-3	12	9	5
Professional & business services	6	24	-1	-17	31	-17	5
Temp help	-19	-3	-30	-24	-16	-49	
Education	5	5	-1	0	-2	-1	0
Health care, social assistance	85	81	88	98	83	82	82
Leisure & hospitality	36	26	7	-9	22	7	15
Other services	3	11	9	4	8	16	5
Government	58	64	32	0	25	70	40
Federal	5	11	3	0	3	5	
State and local	52	54	29	0	22	65	

Source: BLS, Morgan Stanley Research forecasts

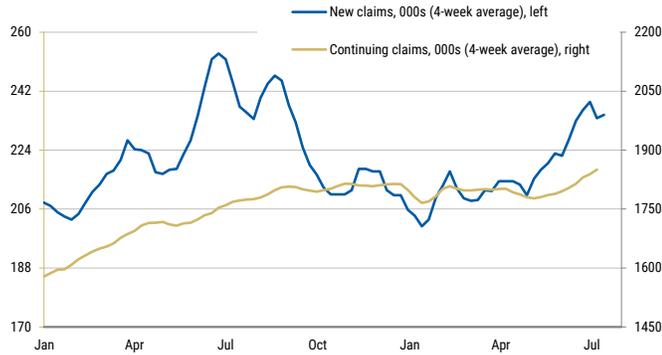
Other labor market indicators have remained solid, with continuing claims rising somewhat but new claims moving about sideways over the past month ([Exhibit 5](#)), even including boosts in the latest week from auto manufacturing states and the Texas power outage. Not yet reported: JOLTs, where job openings ([Exhibit 6](#)) have been falling, the Conference Board's labor market measure, and a relevant week for continuing unemployment insurance claims ([Exhibit 7](#)). (Our forecast could be updated after those.)

Immigration. A month ago, we highlighted the drop in immigration of the last several months. In retrospect, we jumped the gun. While immigration has slowed, the slowdown—about 20k per month ([Exhibit 8](#))—is probably too small to affect payrolls yet.

If immigration does slow more sharply, it should be evident in the unemployment rate. A shock to labor supply and a shock to labor demand each could slow employment growth,

but they have opposite effects on the unemployment rate. Lower supply tightens the labor market and decreases the unemployment rate. Lower demand eases the labor market and raises the unemployment rate.

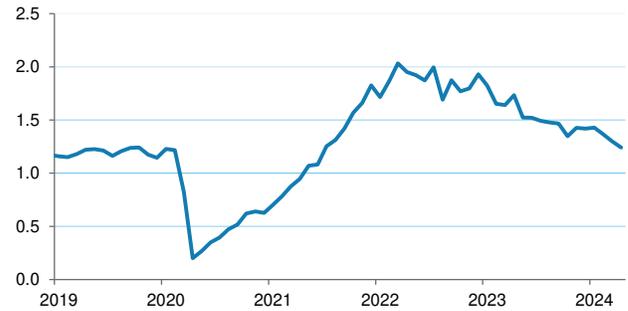
Exhibit 5: New claims have risen notably, continuing claims also up



Source: Department of Labor, Morgan Stanley Research

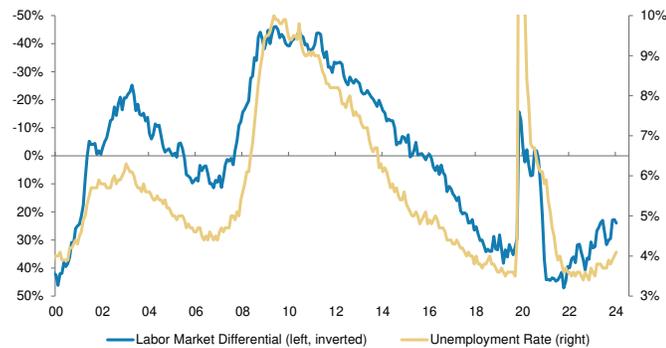
Exhibit 6: The vacancy rate is slipping again

Vacancies/unemployment



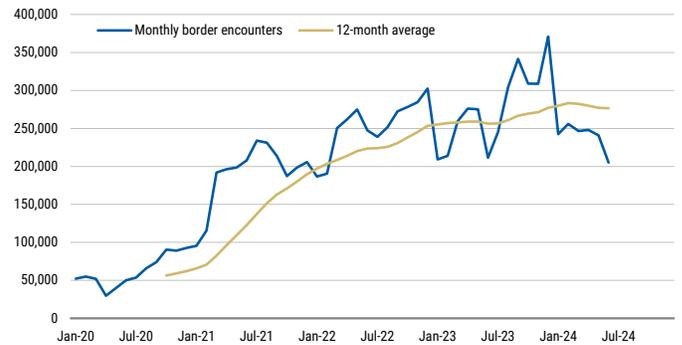
Source: BLS, Morgan Stanley Research

Exhibit 7: Households' labor market assessments improved in June from strong levels



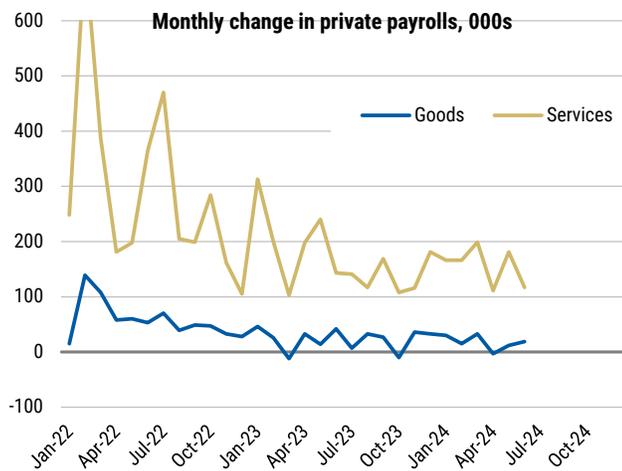
Source: BLS, Conference Board, Morgan Stanley Research

Exhibit 8: Immigration no longer rising as fast as it was



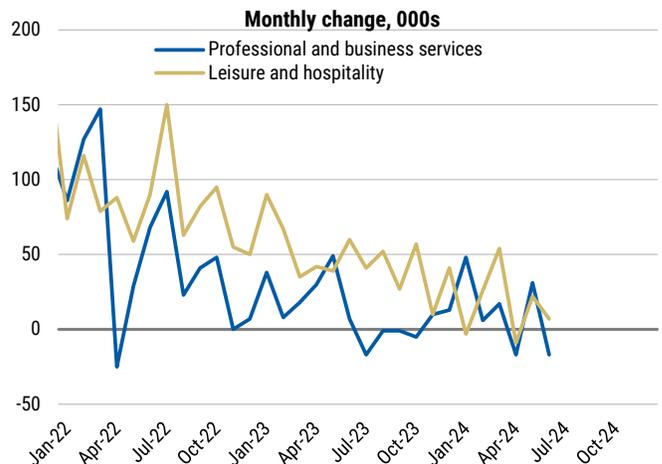
Source: Customs and Border Protection, Morgan Stanley Research

Exhibit 9: Services payrolls slowed in June



Source: BLS, Morgan Stanley Research

Exhibit 10: Temporary employment dragged heavily on payrolls in professional and business services

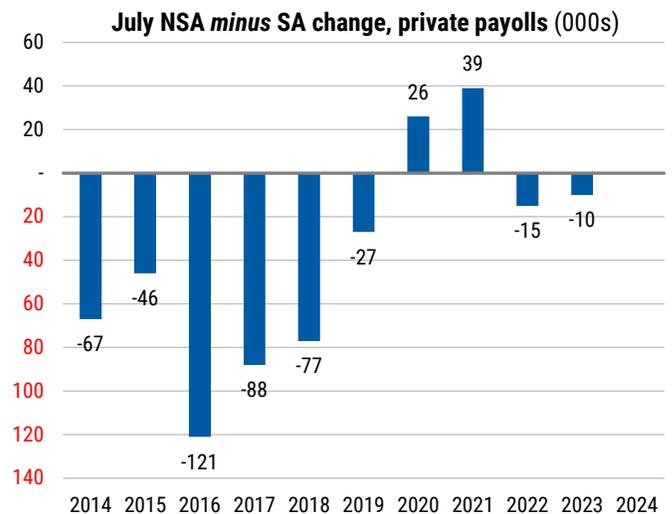
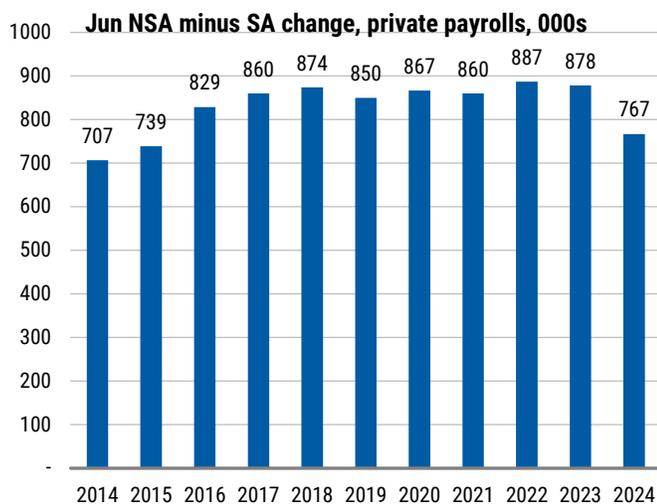


Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Morgan Stanley Research

We do not expect a distortion from seasonal factors in July, but a drag is possible. In the last five years, seasonal factors for July have allowed for small swings up or down in not seasonally adjusted (NSA) payrolls [Exhibit 12](#). But before then, they allowed for fairly large declines in NSA payrolls. If the old seasonal factors better represent the true seasonal pattern in employment, NSA payrolls would fall more than recent years' July seasonal factors suggest, and there could be downward bias to seasonally adjusted private payrolls. However, we think it's more likely that seasonal hiring patterns have shifted and that recent seasonal factors adequately reflect the shift. Last July, the seasonally adjusted payrolls estimate was 39k below the centered five-month average—but the shortfall came as payrolls were slowing so does not necessarily indicate bias.

Exhibit 11: NSA payrolls tend to rise in June. Last year, seasonal factors subtracted about what they had pre-Covid

Exhibit 12: July seasonal factors used to allow for a sharp drop in NSA payrolls, but recently have allowed for little change



Source: BLS, Morgan Stanley Research

Source: BLS, Morgan Stanley Research

Exhibit 13:

Teacher payrolls tends to fall sharply NSA in July. Private industries are inconsistent: typical increases in NSA leisure and hospitality, construction, and finance, but declines in educational services, and transport and warehousing.

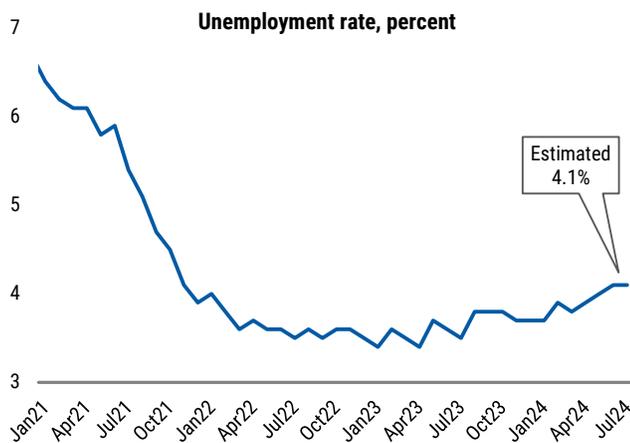
	July	June hurdle	June NSA	June SA
Leisure & Hospitality	92	429	436	7
Local Government, excluding Education	76	173	207	34
Construction	42	134	161	27
Financial Activities	39	66	75	9
Information	25	25	31	6
Federal	16	0	5	5
Professional & Business Services	7	49	32	-17
Other Services	6	52	68	16
Health Care & Social Assistance	5	20	103	82
Mining & Logging	4	6	6	0
Utilities	2	3	4	1
Wholesale Trade	2	34	48	14
State Government, excluding Education	-2	16	29	13
Retail Trade	-8	85	77	-9
Manufacturing	-12	92	84	-8
Transportation & Warehousing	-76	-4	4	7
Educational Services	-86	-225	-226	-1
State Government Education	-88	-278	-265	13
Local Government Education	-1227	-337	-333	5
Total	-989	340	545	205

Source: BLS, Morgan Stanley Research

The 0.4% rise in average hourly earnings that we forecast is a little faster than recent months'; it reflects the downward bias to the workweek (the denominator) because of the Hurricane Beryl. It should reverse next month.

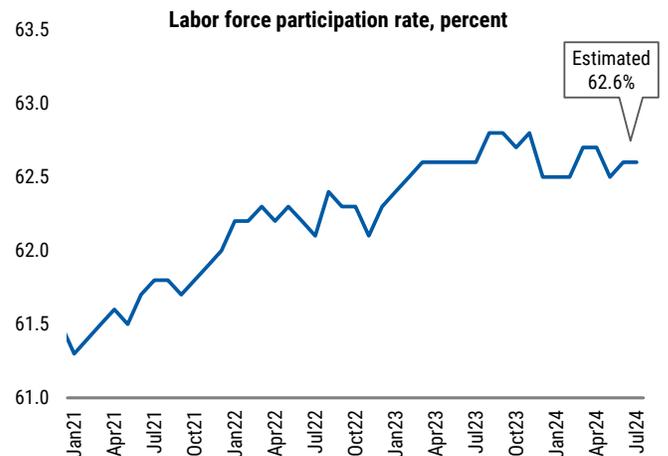
The unemployment rate is probably unchanged at 4.1%. We think that the slowdown in immigration is still too limited to seriously affect labor supply. If more limited labor supply is having an effect, there will be a bit more downward pressure. We expect the labor force participation rate stalls at 62.6% (Exhibit 14 & Exhibit 15).

Exhibit 14: We forecast the unemployment rate stalls at 4.1%



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Morgan Stanley Research forecasts

Exhibit 15: We expect labor force participation remains at 62.6%



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Morgan Stanley Research forecasts

Breakeven payrolls estimate remains at about 265k per month. We had estimated that the breakeven pace for payrolls is around 265k per month (Here, and here). So far this year, that estimate looks credible. Year-to-date payroll growth, labor force participation,

and employment population ratios imply the same breakeven.

Labor force levels in the household survey are probably biased down by two-year old estimates of immigration. But the ratios—employment/population ratio, labor force participation rate, unemployment rate—are probably less affected. We derive implied labor force growth (a breakeven pace for payrolls) from those household survey ratios and the actual increases in payrolls.

$$\text{estimated population} = \text{payrolls} / (\text{employment/population ratio})$$

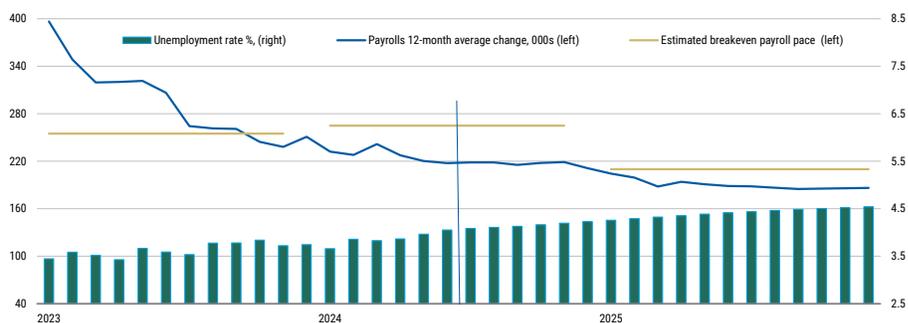
$$\text{estimated labor force} = \text{estimated population} * \text{labor force participation rate}$$

$$\% \text{ change in estimated labor force} = \% \text{ change in breakeven payrolls}$$

Payrolls have risen an average of 222k per month. The employment/population ratio has been unchanged at 60.1%, which implies population growth of 370k per month (222/60.1%). An unchanged labor force participation rate at 62.5% would equate that population growth to 232k per month in labor force growth, or 0.8% growth year to date. With this year's rise in labor force participation, effective labor force growth is 1.0%. Applying that 1.0% growth to December payrolls gives a rise of 265k per month in breakeven payrolls—in line with our original estimate.

With payrolls of 222k per month, well below the derived 265k breakeven, the unemployment rate has been rising fairly rapidly—from 3.7% last December to 4.1% in June.

Exhibit 16: Payrolls are running below the breakeven pace that holds the unemployment rate unchanged. We expect continued upward pressure on the unemployment rate.



Source: BLS, Morgan Stanley Research

Payrolls are likely to be revised down in the benchmark revision, but they then will understate employment growth. On August 21, the BLS will publish the preliminary estimate of the benchmark revision to payrolls. We expect a noticeable downward revision—close to 50k per month on average in the 12 months through March. But we think that downward revision is exaggerated.

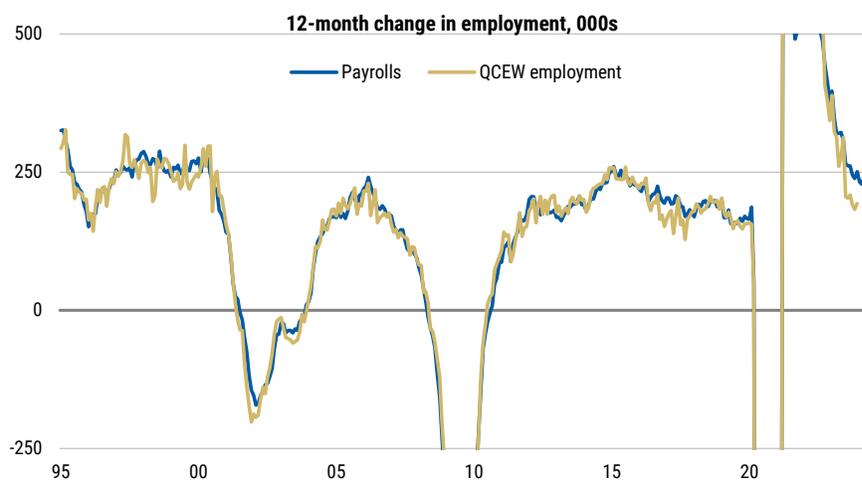
The benchmark revision is based on the QCEW (Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages), which uses administrative records from the unemployment insurance system to arrive at an employment estimate. In principle, it's a more comprehensive count of payroll employment, hours, and earnings than the payrolls report—and more accurate. It therefore is the basis for payroll revision.

But this year is different because QCEW probably undercounts the number of unauthorized immigrants who are working. Many of the unauthorized immigrants are not authorized to work and are ineligible for unemployment insurance. They are therefore not part of the unemployment insurance system's records and cannot be counted in the QCEW. It's an important undercount: Unauthorized immigration has doubled or tripled growth in the labor force. In contrast, the payrolls survey asks that employees be counted whether they are authorized to work or not. Because they don't omit the unauthorized workers, we believe payrolls are giving the more accurate count.

The result: payrolls are on track to be revised downward – but we believe that's not because payrolls are overcounting but because QCEW is undercounting employment.

Our note: [Friday Finish – US Economics: Are Payrolls Overstated?](#)

Exhibit 17: Employment growth is slower in the QCEW estimates than in payrolls



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Morgan Stanley Research

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