

The Current Yield

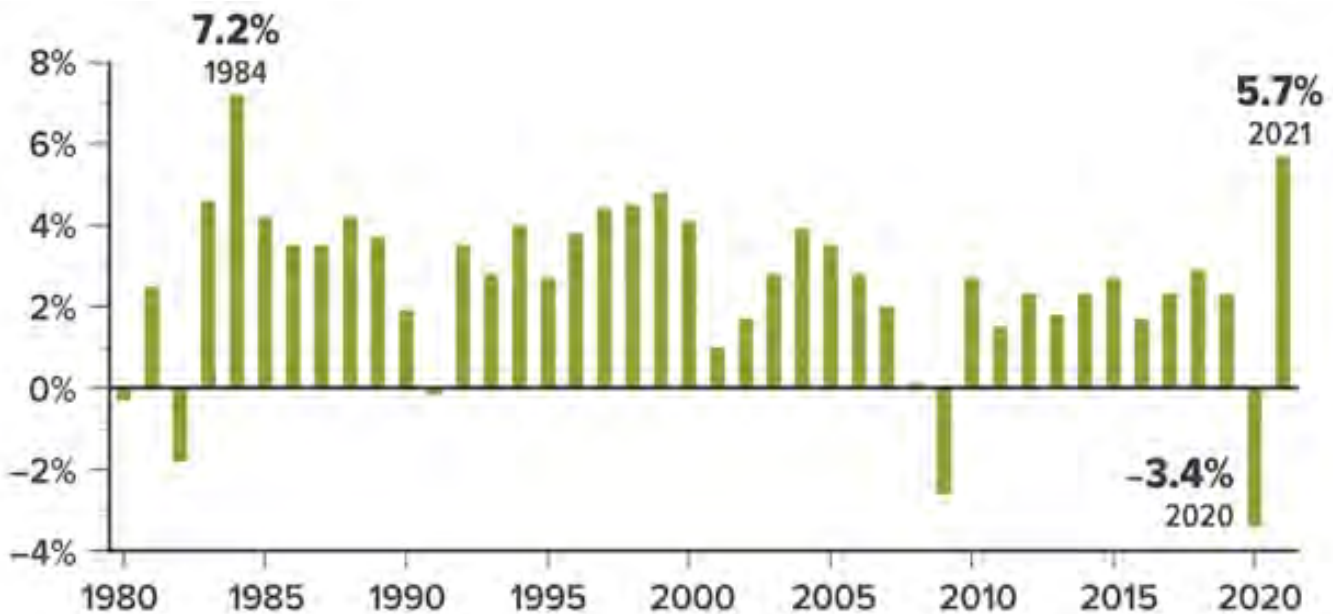
June 2022

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GDP Growth Highest in 37 Years

In 2021, U.S. real gross domestic product (GDP) — the value of goods and services produced in the United States — grew by 5.7%, the highest annual rate since 1984. This marked a strong recovery from 2020, when GDP dropped by 3.4%. Real GDP is adjusted for inflation to more accurately compare economic output at different periods. Current-dollar GDP, typically used to measure the overall size of the economy, increased by an even more impressive 10.1%.



Source: U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2022

Preparing for a Natural Disaster

Most areas in the United States are susceptible to some form of natural disaster, whether it's a wildfire, tornado, hurricane, earthquake, or flood. A severe storm or other catastrophic event often strikes with little warning, can result in costly damage to your home, and puts your family's safety at risk. Being prepared may help you make it through a natural disaster safely.

Protect Your Home

Wherever you live, there are proactive steps you can take to help protect your home from natural disasters:

- To help fend off storm damage, inspect and repair roof shingles and flashing, clean your gutters and downspouts so that water can flow freely away from your home, trim overhanging tree limbs, and consider investing in storm windows, doors, and shutters.
- If you live in a fire zone, create a defensible perimeter around the outside of your home, keep roof surfaces and gutters free of flammable materials such as pine needles, leaves, and branches, and consider installing fire-resistant roofing and/or siding material.
- If you live in an area that could experience a major earthquake, retrofitting an older home (strengthening the foundation with braces and bolts) might reduce the amount of damage caused by severe shaking.

Have an Emergency Plan/Disaster Kit

A natural disaster can sometimes cause power outages that last for days. It can also result in downed power lines, fallen trees and/or flooding that make roads impassable. Know evacuation routes and have an emergency plan that identifies a safe place to meet in the event that family members become separated. Keep important addresses and phone numbers readily accessible and identify a place where you can safely stay for an extended period of time if necessary. In addition, assemble a disaster kit with the following items:

- **Food/supplies.** Stock up on several days' worth of nonperishable food and bottled water. Store other items that are specific to your family's needs, such as infant formula, diapers, pet food, clothing, and blankets.
- **First aid/medicine.** Be prepared for any possible medical needs by having a first-aid kit. Also talk to your doctor about obtaining an extra prescription for important medications you take.
- **Communication/safety items.** Make sure your cell phones are fully charged before the storm arrives. Also gather additional safety items, such as matches, flashlights, batteries, and an AM/FM radio.

- **Important documents/valuables.** Place important documents, such as personal/financial/medical records and any valuables in a secure location that is easily accessible in case of an emergency.

U.S. Natural Catastrophe Losses, 2021 (in millions)



Source: Insurance Information Institute, 2022

Review Your Insurance Coverage

Review all of your insurance policies (e.g., homeowners, renters, and auto) to make sure that you have appropriate coverage for your property and belongings. Your home and its contents should be insured to their full replacement cost, including any new additions, remodels, and furniture. To assist with post-storm insurance claims, be sure to take pictures/videos and make an inventory of your home and valuables in case they are damaged or destroyed.

Keep in mind that certain types of damage (e.g., flood and earthquake) may be excluded from a standard homeowners policy, but separate coverage is often available. Contact your insurance agent to determine if you need to purchase additional insurance tailored to the risk in your area.

Be Ready to File a Claim

If your home suffers severe damage from a natural disaster, you'll need to file a claim with your insurance company. To make the claims process easier, take pictures to document the damage (both inside and outside of your home) as soon as possible. While your claim is being processed, take steps to prevent further damage (e.g., putting a tarp on a damaged roof), since the insurance company may not cover anything beyond the initial damage to your property. Claims are paid up to policy limits.

Otherwise, you may be eligible for immediate disaster relief funds and special programs through the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Federal disaster assistance is usually in the form of loans or grants and is available only if the affected area is declared a disaster area by FEMA and not covered by insurance.

Should You Consider Tapping the Equity in Your Home?

With home values skyrocketing recently, your home may be one of your largest assets. Using home equity to help finance other financial objectives is a strategy many people consider, but before doing so be sure you understand the risks as well as the potential benefits.

Home equity is the difference between how much your home is worth, based on current market conditions, minus your mortgage balance. Let's say your home is worth \$450,000 in the current market and your outstanding mortgage is \$250,000. That means you have \$200,000 in equity.

In most cases, lenders will allow you to borrow up to 80% of your home's value minus your mortgage balance. In the example above, the total amount you might borrow would be \$110,000 (assuming you qualify).

It's probably best to be as conservative as possible when using home equity. There's no guarantee that your home will maintain its current market value, so you could end up owing more than it's worth. Moreover, in the unfortunate event of default, you could lose your house.

How to Access Home Equity

Generally, there are three ways to access home equity:

1. Cash-out refinance: In a cash-out refinance, you would refinance your mortgage for more than what you owe and take the difference in cash.

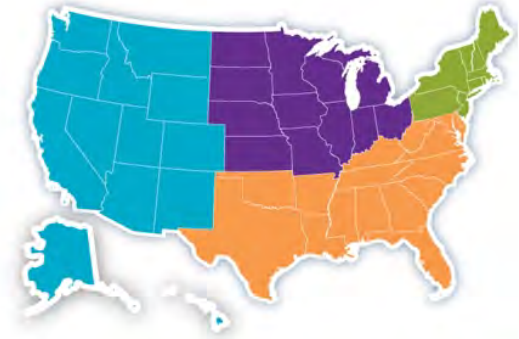
2. Home equity loan: With this type of loan, you would leave your current mortgage untouched and take out a separate loan against the equity in your home, with a fixed interest rate and fixed monthly payments.

3. Home equity line of credit: A HELOC works much like a credit card. You apply for a revolving credit amount up to a certain limit and, upon approval, have access to that money for a specific period, known as the *draw period* (usually 10 years). HELOC funds don't all have to be used right away or at the same time. You can usually access the funds as needed by writing a check or using a linked credit card. Interest rates are variable; required payments will depend on how much you borrow and the prevailing rate. When the draw period ends, all outstanding balances need to be repaid.

Keep in mind that each of these options will have specific fees, including appraisal fees. A refinance could also require closing costs, which can equal thousands of dollars, depending on the amount borrowed.

The best type of loan will depend on your specific situation. If you need a fixed amount of money, a cash-out refinance or home equity loan might be appropriate. If you need an indeterminate amount over time or seek an emergency cash reserve, a HELOC might better serve your needs.

Growth in Home Sales Prices Since 2019



	2019 median sales price	2022 median sales price	Percentage increase
U.S. national	\$250,100	\$357,300	42.9%
West	\$379,200	\$512,600	35.2%
Midwest	\$188,800	\$248,900	31.8%
South	\$219,900	\$318,800	45.0%
Northeast	\$273,000	\$383,700	40.5%

Source: National Association of Realtors, 2020-2022 (median existing-home sales data as of February 2019 and 2022)

When Using Home Equity Might Make Sense

Because you're putting your home at risk, it's important to think critically and strategically when using home equity. Are you using the funds in a way that could reap future financial benefits, such as home repairs and improvements, helping to pay for a child's college education, or consolidating high-interest debt? Then it might make sense. (A loan used for home repairs may also offer tax benefits; talk to a tax professional.) On the other hand, it might not be in your best financial interest if you're thinking of using the money to fund an extravagant purchase, such as an expensive vacation or new luxury car.

Home equity loans and lines of credit that are not used to buy, build, or substantially improve your primary home (or a second home) are considered home equity debt; you cannot deduct the interest on home equity debt. With a cash-out refinance, you can only deduct interest on the new loan if you use the cash to make a capital improvement on your property.

Adjusting Your Tax Withholding

Now that you've seen last year's tax results and can see where this year is heading, it may be a good time to consider adjustments to your income tax withholding.

Getting It Right

If you have too much tax withheld, you will receive a refund when you file your income tax return, but it might make more sense to reduce your withholding and receive more in your paycheck. However, if you have too little tax withheld, you will owe tax when you file your tax return and might owe a penalty.

Two tools — IRS Form W-4 and the Tax Withholding Estimator on [irs.gov](https://www.irs.gov) — can be used to help figure out the right amount of federal income tax to have withheld from your paycheck. This can be beneficial when tax laws change, your filing status changes, you start a new job, or there are other changes in your personal situation.

You might make a more concerted effort to review your withholding if any of the following situations apply to you:

- File as a two-income family
- Hold more than one job at the same time
- Work for only part of the year
- Claim credits, such as the child tax credit
- Itemize deductions
- Have a high income and a complex return

Form W-4

In some circumstances, you will need to give your employer a new Form W-4 within 10 days (for example, if the number of allowances you are allowed to claim is reduced or your filing status changes from married to single). In other circumstances, you can submit a new Form W-4 whenever you wish. See IRS Publication 505 for more information.

Your employer will withhold tax from your paycheck based on the information you provide on Form W-4 and the IRS withholding tables.

If you have a large amount of nonwage income, such as interest, dividends, or capital gains, you might want to increase the tax withheld or claim fewer allowances. In this situation, also consider making estimated tax payments using IRS Form 1040-ES.

You can claim exemption from federal tax withholding on Form W-4 if both of these situations apply: (1) in the prior tax year, you were entitled to a refund of all federal income tax withheld because you had no tax liability, and (2) for the current year, you expect a refund of all federal income tax withheld because you anticipate having no tax liability.

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