



Thirdpath

*Middle-Market Direct
Lending Outlook:*
A Goldilocks Market Setup?

David Ren January 2026

Managing Partner, Head of Alternative Credit

Key Takeaways

- 1. Structural alpha erosion.** We believe capital crowding, scale effects, and compressed illiquidity premia have materially reduced the opportunity for sustained alpha in middle-market direct lending.
- 2. Recessionary reset creates opportunity.** A recession-driven rate-cut cycle, while riskier, may reset spreads higher and improve forward-looking return prospects.
- 3. Fundraising pressure elevates credit risk.** Tighter fundraising conditions may reduce managers' flexibility to support stressed credits, increasing default risk across portfolios.
- 4. Discipline and dry powder are critical.** We believe managers and allocators should actively manage reinvestment risk, stress-test yield compression scenarios, assess fundraising resilience and liquidity buffers, and preserve dry powder for potential dislocation vintages.

Table of Contents

1. Executive Summary
2. Market Backdrop
3. Cost of Capital & Relative Attractiveness
4. Portfolio Dynamics
5. Supply & Demand for Capital
6. Fundraising & Valuation Implications
7. Default Risk Dynamics in a Slowing Fundraising Environment
8. Historical Context: Default Rates in the Middle Market
9. Scenario Analysis
10. Key Takeaways & Implications
11. Conclusion

1. Executive Summary

Financial markets are currently characterized by public equities near all-time highs, corporate credit spreads at historically tight levels, and the potential for a transition toward a U.S. Treasury bull market should the Federal Reserve begin to cut rates.

This report examines the potential implications of these conditions for middle-market direct lending, contrasting outcomes under a "Goldilocks" soft-landing scenario versus a recession-driven rate-cut environment. In this context, we also highlight key credit market indicators for investors to monitor as credit relative value and risk continue to shift.

2. Market Backdrop

Public markets continue to reflect a constructive risk environment. Equity markets are trading near record levels, indicating sustained investor confidence and a strong appetite for risk assets.¹

In credit markets, spreads across both investment grade and high yield remain historically tight, resulting in limited risk premia.²

At the same time, interest rates have stabilized, with Treasury yields trending modestly lower amid increasing market expectations for potential Federal Reserve rate cuts.³

Together, we believe these dynamics support a broadly favorable macro backdrop. However, this environment may present challenges for middle-market direct lending managers. Tighter spreads and lower base rates have contributed to compressed relative returns, increasing the importance of selectivity, structuring discipline, and sourcing advantages.

¹ S&P Index; NASDAQ. As of latest available data.

² Markit CDX Indices; Bloomberg/Barclays Indices. As of latest available data.

³ SOFR; U.S. Treasury 2-Year; U.S. Treasury 10-Year. As of latest available data.

3. Cost of Capital & Relative Attractiveness

We anticipate that declining base rates, including SOFR and Prime, will directly reduce borrower coupons in floating-rate middle-market direct lending, placing downward pressure on portfolio yields. In a sustained Treasury bull market, gross yields in the asset class could compress meaningfully, with returns potentially trending toward the 7-8% range.

As yields compress, relative value considerations become increasingly important. Public credit markets, including investment grade credit, structured credit, and mortgage-backed securities, may appear more attractive as their yields converge with those of middle-market direct lending, but without the same illiquidity trade-off. This dynamic underscores the growing relevance of relative value as credit markets adjust to a lower-rate environment.

4. Portfolio Dynamics

Lower rates can affect private credit portfolios through several second-order dynamics:

NAV Stability: Falling rates can support valuations of fixed-rate components within private credit portfolios, including mezzanine positions, capital solutions, and certain structured credit tranches.

Reinvestment Risk: Borrowers are more likely to refinance out of higher-cost legacy financings, accelerating repayment cycles and requiring redeployment into new assets at lower prevailing yields.

Convexity Gap: Unlike public bonds, middle-market loans offer limited convexity, reducing upside participation in a Treasury bull market and constraining portfolio benefit from further rate declines.

5. Supply & Demand for Capital

Shifts in the relative attractiveness of public and private credit markets can materially affect both borrower behavior and deal flow in middle-market direct lending. As public high yield and investment grade markets reopen, some issuance that would otherwise be sourced through private credit may migrate back to public markets, particularly for larger or higher-quality borrowers.

At the same time, increased competition among private lenders can place pressure on deal terms, resulting in more borrower-friendly structures and pricing. On the demand side, capital flows may also become more selective, as institutional investors and retail capital accessed through vehicles such as BDCs reassess allocations to middle-market direct lending when alternative yield opportunities are available elsewhere.

6. Fundraising & Valuation Implications

Lower base rates and tighter credit spreads have mixed implications across private credit vehicles. Business development companies may benefit in the near term from relatively stable net asset values as rates decline, but face increasing pressure on earnings and dividend generation as base rates fall. In this environment, valuation premiums to NAV may become more difficult to sustain.

For middle-market direct lending funds, fundraising momentum may moderate as the illiquidity premium narrows and relative value versus public credit becomes less compelling for certain investors. As capital becomes more selective, manager positioning takes on greater importance, with increased emphasis on sourcing differentiation, sector expertise, and the ability to deploy dry powder opportunistically as market conditions evolve.

7. Default Risk Dynamics in a Slowing Fundraising Environment

A critical risk to monitor is how constrained fundraising conditions affect the ability of BDCs and middle-market direct lending funds to support portfolio companies during periods of stress:

Reduced Follow-On Capital: If funds are unable to raise new equity or debt capital efficiently, their capacity to provide rescue financing or execute amend-and-extend solutions for struggling borrowers may be significantly diminished.

Increased Default Probability: Companies facing liquidity pressure may be forced into restructuring or bankruptcy sooner if sponsors and lenders are unable to inject incremental capital.

Value Erosion: Limited access to new capital can trigger fire-sale dynamics, impairing recoveries on existing loans.

Sponsor Dynamics: Private equity sponsors may face challenges securing add-on capital to stabilize portfolio companies, weakening alignment between sponsors and lenders during periods of stress.

Contagion Risk: In stressed sectors, the inability of multiple BDCs or direct lending platforms to raise capital simultaneously could amplify defaults across cohorts of borrowers and pressure broader market sentiment.

As a result, even in a lower-rate environment, default rates in middle-market direct lending could rise if a fundraising slowdown undermines lenders' ability to support borrowers through periods of stress.

8. Historical Context: Default Rates in the Middle Market

Global Financial Crisis (2008–2009), 12–14% middle-market default rate

Middle-market default rates increased sharply into the 12–14% range, materially exceeding peak default rates in large-cap leveraged loans, which reached approximately 10%. Recovery rates were also significantly below historical averages, reflecting constrained liquidity and limited lender capacity to support stressed borrowers.⁴

COVID-19 Shock (2020), 6–8% middle-market default rate

Default rates in middle-market loans rose to approximately 6–8%, with outcomes varying by sector exposure. Unprecedented fiscal and monetary stimulus, combined with rapid fundraising by BDCs and private credit funds, helped contain losses. Many distressed borrowers benefited from amend-and-extend transactions and sponsor equity infusions.⁴

Long-Term Averages, 3–4% middle-market default rate

Over a full cycle, middle-market loan defaults have historically averaged approximately 3–4% annually. However, outcomes are highly cyclical and closely linked to the availability of follow-on capital from lenders and sponsors.⁴

This history highlights that liquidity and fundraising capacity are critical mitigants of default risk. When capital markets are disrupted or fundraising slows, middle-market borrowers tend to experience disproportionate stress relative to large-cap issuers with broader and more flexible financing options.

⁴ S&P Global, Leveraged Commentary & Data (LCD). As of latest available data.

9. Scenario Analysis

To frame potential outcomes for middle-market direct lending, we consider two illustrative scenarios based on differing macroeconomic and credit conditions.

Scenario A: Soft Landing / "Goldilocks"

In a soft-landing scenario characterized by lower interest rates and stable economic growth, credit performance remains relatively strong. Default activity is limited, and overall credit quality remains resilient.

However, declining base rates contribute to yield compression and a shrinking illiquidity premium. As public credit markets reopen, heightened reinvestment risk emerges, with issuers increasingly drawn toward public high yield and investment grade markets, reducing private deal flow and pressuring forward returns.

Scenario B: Recessionary Rate-Cut

In a recessionary scenario, interest rates decline alongside slowing economic growth. Default rates increase, creating a larger pool of stressed and distressed opportunities. Credit spreads widen, potentially producing attractive vintage years for new capital deployment as the liquidity premium re-expands.

However, outcomes are highly dependent on access to capital. If fundraising stalls, BDCs and direct lending funds with limited balance sheet flexibility may be unable to stabilize borrowers, amplifying default risk and exacerbating credit losses despite more attractive entry points.

10. Key Takeaways & Implications

Sustained "Goldilocks" conditions may present meaningful headwinds for middle-market direct lending yields and challenge the asset class's relative value as base rates decline and spreads remain tight. In contrast, a recessionary rate-cut environment, while riskier from a credit perspective, would likely reset spreads higher and create more compelling entry points for new capital deployment.

Across both scenarios, fundraising capacity emerges as a critical determinant of outcomes. Constraints on fundraising can materially heighten default risk by reducing managers' flexibility to support stressed credits, amplifying losses during periods of dislocation. As a result, both managers and allocators must remain focused on liquidity, capital availability, and the ability to respond dynamically as conditions evolve.

In this environment, key areas of focus include:

- Monitoring reinvestment risk as borrowers refinance and deal flow shifts
- Stress-testing portfolios under yield compression scenarios
- Assessing fundraising resilience and available liquidity buffers
- Preserving dry powder for potential dislocation-driven vintage opportunities

11. Conclusion

The current high-yield environment in middle-market direct lending is not structurally permanent. If Treasury yields decline and the Federal Reserve begins to cut rates, the asset class's forward return profile is likely to compress, reducing its relative attractiveness versus fixed-rate credit markets and other credit asset classes. In parallel, a slowdown in fundraising could impair lenders' ability to support stressed credits, increasing default risk even in an otherwise benign macro environment.

Historical experience during the Global Financial Crisis and the COVID-19 shock underscores the outsized role that liquidity and fundraising capacity play in shaping default outcomes in the middle market. Only in periods of market dislocation, when spreads widen and capital becomes scarce, does the asset class tend to regain its asymmetric return profile.

Thirdpath

We provide investors with access to differentiated private markets opportunities across primaries, secondaries, direct investments, co-investments, independent sponsors, and GP seeding & stakes, underpinned by alignment, disciplined execution, and data-driven insight.

INVESTMENT TEAM



David Ren

Managing Partner, Head of Alternative Credit



Brent Pasternack

Sr. MD, Alternative Credit



Sam Howard

VP, Alternative Credit



Dylan Li

Analyst, Investments

LEGAL & OPERATIONS TEAM



John McGuinness

Managing Partner, Co-COO, GC and CCO



Brey Jones

Managing Partner, Managed Accounts



Thalia Gietzen

CFO & Co-COO



Bret Awbrey

VP, Finance

Sources

1. S&P Index; NASDAQ.
2. Markit CDX Indices; Bloomberg/Barclays Indices.
3. SOFR; U.S. Treasury 2-Year; U.S. Treasury 10-Year.
4. S&P Global, Leveraged Commentary & Data (LCD).
5. Federal Reserve.

Disclosures

This material is for informational and discussion purposes only and is not intended as an offer or a solicitation of an offer to buy any security, investment product, or investment advisory service. The information contained herein does not constitute investment, legal, regulatory, tax, accounting, or other professional advice and should not be relied upon as such.

Unless otherwise noted, all information, views, and opinions expressed are as of the date of this report and are subject to change without notice. There can be no assurance that the views expressed herein will prove to be correct or that the trends described will continue. Past performance is not indicative of future results.

This material reflects the views of Thirdpath and is based on information believed to be reliable; however, Thirdpath makes no representation or warranty, express or implied, as to the accuracy, completeness, or fairness of the information or opinions contained herein and accepts no liability for any direct or indirect losses arising from its use.

Certain information has been obtained from third-party sources, which have not been independently verified. Any forward-looking statements included herein are based on current expectations, estimates, assumptions, and projections and involve known and unknown risks and uncertainties that may cause actual outcomes to differ materially. Words such as "may," "should," "expects," "believes," "estimates," "anticipates," or similar expressions are intended to identify forward-looking statements. Any projections are, by their nature, hypothetical, and are provided solely for illustrative purposes.

All investments involve risk, including the potential loss of capital. Risks may include, but are not limited to, market risk, credit risk, liquidity risk, interest rate risk, valuation risk, and conflicts of interest. Diversification does not guarantee profits or protect against losses.

This document is confidential and intended solely for the use of its intended recipients. It may not be reproduced, distributed, or disclosed, in whole or in part, without the prior written consent of Thirdpath. All information provided is as of July 2026, unless otherwise indicated.

© Thirdpath 2026. All rights reserved.

Thirdpath

Read more on thirdpath.com

© Thirdpath 2026. All rights reserved.