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The Effect of the Consumer Financial Protection Agency Act of 2009 on Consumer Credit

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The U.S. Department of the Treasury has submitted the Consumer Financial Protection Agency Act of 2009 to Congress for the purpose of overhauling consumer financial regulation. This study has examined the likely effect of the Act on the availability of credit to American consumers. To do so we have examined the legislation in detail to assess how it would alter current consumer protection regulation, reviewed the rationales provided for the new legislation by those who designed its key features, considered why consumers borrow money and benefit from doing so, and reviewed the factors behind the expansion of credit availability over the last thirty years.

Based on our analysis we have concluded that the CFPA Act of 2009 would make it harder and more expensive for consumers to borrow. Under plausible yet conservative assumptions the CFPA would:

- increase the interest rates consumers pay by at least 160 basis points;
- reduce consumer borrowing by at least 2.1 percent; and,
- reduce the net new jobs created in the economy by 4.3 percent.

By reducing borrowing the Act would also reduce consumer spending that further drives job creation and economic growth. In addition to restricting the availability of credit over the long term, the CFPA Act of 2009 would also slow the recovery from the deep recession the economy is now in by reducing borrowing, spending, and business formation.

The financial crisis has surfaced a number of serious consumer financial protection problems that were not dealt with adequately by federal regulators. Rather than proposing expeditious and practical reforms that can deal with those problems, the Treasury Department has put forward a proposal that would disrupt current regulatory agency efforts to deal with these issues.

A. How the CFPA Act of 2009 Would Change Consumer Financial Laws and Regulations

The Administration's Consumer Financial Protection Agency Act of 2009 would:

- Create a new powerful agency that would take over the responsibilities and possibly the staffs for consumer financial services regulation from six federal agencies.
- Enable the new agency to design standard consumer financial products and require lenders to make these agency-designed products available to consumers before or at the same time as the lenders make their own financial products available.
- Enable the new agency to prohibit certain consumer financial products or services or specific product features, as well as control the pricing, marketing, and distribution of those products or services.

- Provide for the new agency to impose more stringent and intrusive disclosure requirements on providers of consumer financial products and services than existing federal regulators can impose.
- Create a new liability for financial institutions that engage in undefined “abusive” or “unreasonable” practices and enable the new agency to reach different and more expansive interpretations of “unfair and deceptive” practices than found in current jurisprudence.
- Permit and encourage state and local governments to adopt more stringent consumer financial protection regulation than adopted by the new agency.

This paper focuses on the CFPA Act that the Administration introduced in July 2009. House Finance Committee Chairman Frank has proposed changes to this Act which the Treasury Secretary Geithner appears to be willing to accept. However, given that these changes could be reversed or other changes could be made as the legislation works its way through Congress, we focus on the Administration’s original bill rather than a moving target. Chairman Frank’s proposed changes do not significantly alter any of our conclusions.

B. The Consequences of the CFPA Act of 2009 for the Access to and Cost of Consumer Credit

The Treasury Department proposed this new system of consumer financial protection in its June 2009 white paper *Financial Regulatory Reform: A New Foundation*. However, the proposal for the new agency and many of the key principles for how this agency would regulate consumer financial products were presented in articles and reports that were authored by several law professors, including the Assistant Secretary of the Treasury who was involved in the drafting of the legislation. These articles and reports provide the intellectual foundation for modifications in consumer protection regulation on the premise that consumers are irrational and make mistakes systemically in how they borrow money. These writings provide a guide for how its proponents intend the new agency and laws to work.

Based on our research, we have reached three key findings. The CFPA Act would:

- Make it harder and more expensive for consumers to borrow and would risk reversing the decades-long trend towards the democratization of credit.
- Create a “supernanny” agency that is designed to substitute the choice of bureaucrats for those of consumers. And,
- Jeopardize the financial recovery by reducing credit when the economy is fragile and there is already too little credit.

We briefly explain each of our findings.

C. The CFPA Act Would Make It Harder and More Expensive for Consumers to Borrow

The CFPA as it is envisioned by the U.S. Department of the Treasury and its proponents would likely:

- Prohibit lenders from offering some credit products and services that consumers want and benefit from. The CFPA would have the power to do this and the proponents of the agency have argued that many common products, including subprime mortgages and credit cards, are of dubious benefit to consumers.
- Impose significant additional costs on lenders that would be passed on to borrowers. These costs would include exponentially higher litigation and regulatory costs that would result from allowing states and municipalities to adopt more stringent regulations and imposing new and untested liability standards on lenders. They also include the costs of complying with the stronger regulations that the CFPA is supposed to apply.
- Require lenders to push consumers towards lending products designed by the CFPA. The CFPA would have the power to impose significant costs on lenders offering innovative lending products and the consumers who want them. The CFPA's proponents strongly advocated this paternalistic approach in which the government provides soft or hard "nudges" to get consumers to take an option these proponents prefer. There is no reason to believe that products designed by a regulatory agency would be better than those designed by lenders and freely chosen by consumers. (The CFPA may have sufficient powers to "induce" lenders to provide products of its design even without the ability to require lenders to offer "plain vanilla" products.)

These aspects of the CFPA would result in consumers losing access to methods of lending that the agency prohibits or that lenders withdraw as a result of the higher costs they incur. Lenders will also pass on the higher costs resulting from federal and state regulation of lending products to consumers in the form of higher interest rates and fees. These aspects of the CFPA Act would likely reverse the decade long trend towards the democratization of credit. The increased cost of lending combined with requirements to offer agency-designed products is likely to result in a significant reduction in credit availability, particularly to people who have historically had more difficulty obtaining access to credit. Finally the increased cost of credit and reduced availability would impose collateral damage on small businesses that often rely on consumer financial products.

D. The CFPA Act Would Create a "Supernanny" that is Designed to Substitute Bureaucratic Choice for Consumer Choice

The CFPA Act, as explained by its proponents, is based on the findings of "behavioral law and economics" that consumers make bad decisions when it comes to financial services products and would be made better off with the government steering them to better decisions. A CFPA premised on this paternalistic view would be prone to replace what consumers believe is in their interest with its own views. It is doubtful that even the most well educated bureaucrats could design sustainable and profitable products better suited to satisfy consumer needs than those designed by lenders. Similarly, it is

unlikely that any group of regulators could make better decisions on how and on what terms to borrow than the consumers with the greatest stake in the loan.

E. The CFPB Act Would Jeopardize the Financial Recovery

The CFPB Act poses especially severe risks to American households and to the economy over the next few years. The American economy remains fragile. Credit availability to households is restricted, which has hurt them directly. The credit crunch has also affected the economy through decreased economic activity, harming consumers indirectly as a result of fewer jobs and reduced incomes. In addition to the long-run effects the CFPB Act would have on credit availability, the proposed legislation would also especially dampen credit availability in the nearer term because financial institutions would face a great deal of uncertainty over the scope and risks of the new regulations. That reduced credit availability would likely slow the economic recovery and especially impact job creation as a result of the multiplier effect of consumer spending on economic activity. It would also dampen the formation of new businesses that generate most of the economy's net new jobs. Adopting a new regulatory system for consumer financial products that could make it harder for consumers to borrow in 2010 and 2011 is a very bad idea.

F. Conclusion

The CFPB Act of 2009 is a misguided attempt to erect a supernanny agency that could substitute its own view for those of consumers on how and under what circumstances consumers should be able to borrow money. Short term the CFPB would tighten the credit crunch that still threatens the economy. Long-term it would reduce the availability of credit generally to consumers as well as small businesses. Most unfortunately, the CFPB-induced reduction in credit availability would reverse successful efforts to democratize credit by which all segments of American consumers have increasingly been able to borrow to meet their short-term and long-term needs.

I. INTRODUCTION

With the Consumer Financial Protection Agency Act of 2009 the U.S. Department of the Treasury has proposed a sweeping overhaul of consumer financial services regulation.¹ The Administration's proposed legislation² would create a new agency which would take over many of the consumer protection functions of several federal regulatory agencies and have jurisdiction over virtually all consumer financial products and services.³ The new agency is intended to achieve stronger regulation of consumer financial products and services through more extensive powers than existing agencies have under current laws.⁴

Under the Administration's bill the CFPA would have the power to, among other things:

- prohibit certain consumer financial products or services or features of those products or services;⁵
- impose more stringent and intrusive disclosure requirements on providers of consumer financial products and services;⁶
- require that providers offer “plain vanilla” products that the agency would design, before or at the same time those providers offered their own variants on these standard products;⁷ and,
- ensure that underserved consumers and communities would have access to consumer services, lending, and investment.⁸

¹ UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY, CONSUMER FINANCIAL PROTECTION AGENCY ACT OF 2009 (2009), available at <http://www.financialstability.gov/docs/CFPA-Act.pdf> [hereinafter CFPA Act] (proposing 2009 Consumer Financial Protection Agency legislation for passage by Congress). The reforms of consumer financial protection and the proposal to create a single agency were presented on July 17, 2009 in UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY, FINANCIAL REGULATORY REFORM: A NEW FOUNDATION 55-75 (2009) [hereinafter New Foundation], available at http://www.financialstability.gov/docs/regs/FinalReport_web.pdf (outlining proposals for various governmental regulations of financial services and credit products).

² House Finance Chairman Barney Frank has proposed several significant changes to the original legislation including the ability of the CFPA to require financial institutions to issue plain vanilla products and to require that covered businesses make “reasonable” disclosures. Treasury Secretary Geithner has endorsed these changes. See Daniel Indiviglio, *Frank Waters Down Consumer Protection Proposal*, THE ATLANTIC ONLINE, September 23, 2009. As we expect that further pieces of legislation and amendments will be introduced on this topic, rather than analyzing a moving target, we focus on the Administration's original proposal in this paper. Most of our analysis of the CFPA Act of 2009 applies even after Chairman Frank's proposed changes.

³ These include the Federal Reserve Board of Governors, Office of the Comptroller of the Currency, Office of Thrift Supervision, Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, National Credit Union Administration, and the Federal Trade Commission. See CFPA Act, *supra* note 1, at § 1061(a). While the CFPA would regulate many consumer financial products and services, there are two principal exceptions: (1) insurance would be excluded, except for credit insurance, mortgage insurance, and title insurance; (2) investment products that are already regulated by the SEC or CFTC would be excluded. CFPA Act, *supra* note 1, at § 1082(d).

⁴ New Foundation, *supra* note 1, at 3 (“We propose . . . stronger regulations to improve the transparency, fairness, and appropriateness of consumer and investor products and services.”).

⁵ CFPA Act, *supra* note 1, at § 1031(c).

⁶ *Id.* at § 1032.

⁷ *Id.* at § 1036(b).

⁸ *Id.* at § 1014(c)(2).

The proposed legislation would expressly allow states and localities to impose stricter regulations than those adopted by the CFPA and engage in enforcement efforts complementing those conducted by the CFPA.⁹ The Act would therefore end federal preemption of state consumer protection for nationally chartered financial institutions. It would also change the law on consumer financial protection by extending the current condemnation of “unfair and deceptive practices” to include “abusive” practices¹⁰ and require that lenders make “reasonable” disclosures.¹¹

As the U.S. Congress considers the CFPA Act it would seem prudent to consider the benefits and costs of the Act for consumers. It would also seem desirable to consider whether the failures that have been exposed by the financial crisis are best dealt with through a new agency, and the other changes in the law mandated by the Act, or through strengthening the efforts of existing agencies under the current legal framework. To help with this evaluation, this paper examines how the CFPA Act of 2009 would likely affect the availability and cost of credit to American consumers.

The tightening of credit following the crisis that began in October 2008 has highlighted the importance of the supply of credit to American households and to the economy overall. Consumers depend on credit to handle uneven income flows over the life cycle as well as various emergencies that come up. Credit enables a considerable part of consumer spending which in turn drives the economy. That consumer spending, in turn, benefits households through the creation of jobs and income. Around half of small business owners also rely on consumer credit to finance their operations which in turn provides jobs and income for the economy.¹² Wise consumer protection regulation helps consumers to the extent that it preserves the benefits from the availability of credit while addressing inappropriate practices that harm consumers. Ill-considered regulatory “protection” can hurt consumers to the extent that it results in a reduction in the supply of credit or an increase in its costs.

⁹ *Id.* at § 1035(a). Currently, OCC rules preempt states and localities from supervising, examining and regulating the business activities of national banks and their operating subsidiaries. 12 C.F.R. pt. 7, 34; UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE, OCC PREEMPTION RULES: OCC SHOULD FURTHER CLARIFY THE APPLICABILITY OF STATE CONSUMER PROTECTION LAWS TO NATIONAL BANKS (2006), available at <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d06387.pdf>. See also Home Owners’ Loan Act of 1933, 12 U.S.C. §§ 1461-1470 (2006).

¹⁰ The terms “abusive” and “abuse” are not defined in the Act. See generally CFPA Act, *supra* note 1, at § 1002 (listing definitions of various terms under the proposed Act).

¹¹ CFPA Act, *supra* note 1, at § 1032(b).

¹² For example, 46.7 percent of businesses with fewer than 500 employees used personal credit cards for business purposes in 2003. See Charles Ou and Victoria Williams, *Lending to Small Businesses by Financial Institutions in the United States*, in SMALL BUSINESSES IN FOCUS: FINANCE, A COMPENDIUM OF RESEARCH BY THE SMALL BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION’S OFFICE OF ADVOCACY (2009).

This paper finds that the CFPA Act risks throwing the baby out with the bathwater by reducing consumer access to credit and raising the cost of credit to all consumers. We have four major concerns.

- **The CFPA Act would make it harder and more expensive for consumers to borrow.** The CFPA would likely impose significant costs and risks on financial institutions. These lenders would reduce the amount of credit they would make available and increase the interest rates and other fees they would charge for credit they continue make available. These costs include sharply increased exposure to administrative fines and litigation costs.
- **The CFPA Act would reduce lending choice especially for socially and economically disadvantaged groups.** The CFPA is designed to reduce the variety of financial products and thereby reduce the choices that consumers have and that financial institutions can offer. This reduction in choice and variety would likely reduce credit availability especially to economically and socially disadvantaged consumers as well as small business owners.
- **The CFPA Act would create a “supernanny” that is designed to substitute bureaucratic choice for consumer choice.** The CFPA Act, as explained by its proponents, is based on the findings of “behavioral law and economics” that consumers make bad decisions when it comes to financial services products and would be made better off with the government steering them to better decisions. We are concerned that a CFPA premised on this paternalistic view would be prone to replace what consumers believe is in their interest with its own views and that the behavioral law and economics field that is the basis for the Act is too quick at using limited evidence to second-guess the choice that consumers make for themselves.
- **The CFPA Act would jeopardize the financial recovery.** In addition to the long-run effects the CFPA Act would have on credit availability, the proposed legislation would especially dampen credit availability in the nearer term because financial institutions would face a great deal of uncertainty over the scope and risks of the new regulations. That reduced credit availability would likely slow the economic recovery by reducing consumer borrowing and spending. It would also reduce job creation as a result of the multiplier effect of consumer spending on economic activity and as a result of preventing the new firms that create most new jobs from obtaining necessary credit. Adopting a new regulatory system for consumer financial products that could make it harder for consumers and small businesses to borrow in 2010 and 2011 is a very bad idea.

The financial crisis has exposed a number of specific consumer protection problems. It would be more expeditious and more efficient to target these problems directly. In some

cases it may be prudent to give these agencies additional authority to deal with problems that they cannot address under current law.

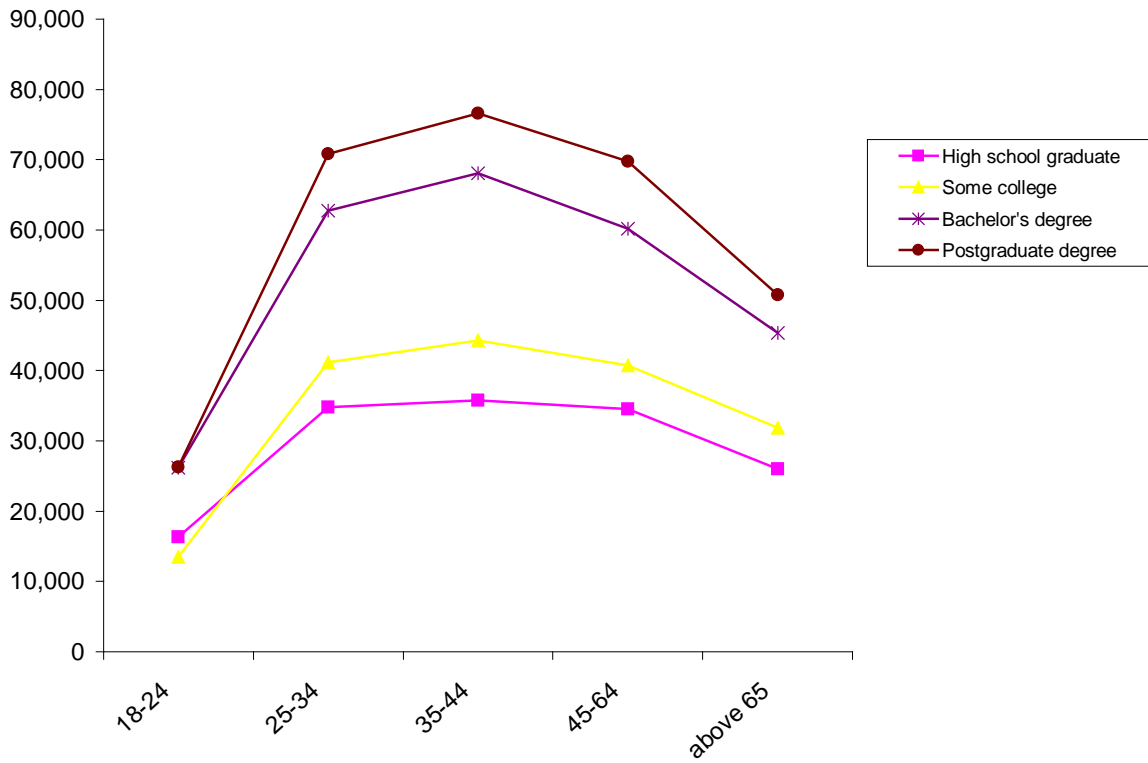
This paper explains the basis for our conclusions. To understand why the CFPA is likely to be harmful it is important to understand why, as we explain in Section II, consumers benefit from borrowing and from the consumer lending products that make borrowing possible and convenient. It is also important to recognize, as we describe in Section III, how financial innovation has increased the supply of credit to consumers and democratized the credit by making it available to a wider swath of society. To predict how the CFPA would likely affect the availability of consumer credit it is useful to examine, as we do in Section IV, the rationale for the CFPA Act of 2009 and what the CFPA's proponents seek to accomplish. We then analyze, in Section V, how the provisions of the CFPA Act, and the powers granted to the new agency, would likely affect the cost and availability of consumer credit to households and small businesses. Section VI presents our conclusion which is, quite simply, that the CFPA would likely harm consumers and small businesses by restricting the availability of credit and would do so at a time when the economy needs more not less credit.

II. CONSUMER BORROWING

A. Consumer Benefits from Borrowing

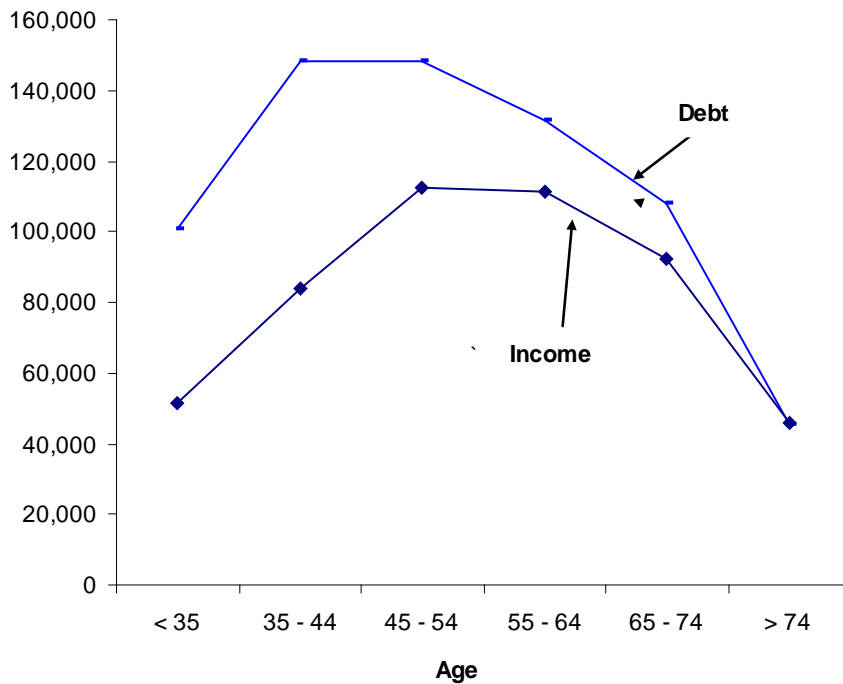
Households mainly borrow to even out how much they consume over their lifecycles. People tend to have increasing wages over the first couple of decades of their time in the workforce. Wages reach a plateau and then decline until retirement. Figure 1 shows the typical time patterns which vary according to educational level. If people neither borrowed nor saved they would live much better in middle age than earlier or later. In fact, to the extent they are able to, households usually borrow when they are young. They may take out loans to finance an education, the purchase of durable consumer goods, or even the purchase of a home. As they get older they can reduce borrowing and become net savers through home ownership or other investments. They draw down their investments, plus forced savings such as social security, after they leave the work force. Figure 1 shows the typical profile of borrowing and asset accumulation over a lifecycle.

Figure 1. Lifetime earnings for different levels of education in 2007 dollars.



Note: Earnings values correspond to averages for male and female workers.
Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Historical Income Tables, available at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/histinc/p28.html>.

Figure 2. Borrowing and income over the lifecycle in 2007 dollars.



Note: Debt includes consumer and mortgage debt. Income corresponds to average annual before-tax income.
 Source: Federal Reserve Board of Governors, Survey of Consumer Finance, 2007. The debt line shows the level of accumulated debt at a point in time while the income line shows the annual income at a point in time.

Consumers borrow for other reasons as well. Some consumers borrow because they have experienced unanticipated drops in income, perhaps due to a job loss or a divorce, or because they have an unusual expense, such as a wedding or a vacation. Many consumers also borrow to pay for other expenses such as buying clothes.¹³ As has always

¹³ Consumer surveys have found that consumers typically prefer to use their debit cards instead of credit cards for small everyday purchases. See, e.g., Susan Reda, 2003 *Consumer Credit Survey*, STORES MAGAZINE, November 2003. Economists explain the consumer preference to use debit cards instead of credit cards with “mental accounting.” Mental accounting refers to the thought process that consumers engage in before they enter into a transaction which discourages them from overspending and serve as a mechanism of self regulation. See Drazen Prelec & George Loewenstein, *The Red and The Black: Mental Accounting of Savings and Debt*, 17 *MARKETING SCIENCE* 4 (1998).

been the case some consumers take on more debt than they should and run into trouble.¹⁴ But, by and large, most people borrow responsibly.¹⁵

Consumers benefit directly from borrowing. Economists have shown that, as a result of aligning consumption and income more closely, consumers can increase their overall level of well being over their lifetimes. In any event, most people who can borrow against their future incomes tend to enjoy a nicer lifestyle when they are younger than they could achieve from current income.¹⁶ Consumers also benefit indirectly from borrowing. By buying more they enable businesses to expand production and create more jobs.¹⁷ That then raises consumer income and spending. International experience also suggests that the availability of credit spurs economic growth.¹⁸

B. The Risks of Lending to Consumers

Financial institutions face some serious problems in lending to consumers though. There is great uncertainty over the ability of any individual to pay back a loan. The earnings with which an individual borrower can pay back the loan are unknown and in the future. Moreover, it can be difficult to collect when people default because sometimes their only collateral is whatever money they might earn from future work. Lending faces the well-known problems of adverse selection (loans are most attractive to those who are least likely to pay them back); asymmetric information (borrowers know more about their ability to repay than lenders ever could); and moral hazard (borrowers will take less care

¹⁴ See generally Todd J. Zywicki, *An Economic Analysis of the Consumer Bankruptcy Crisis*, 99 NW. U. L. REV. 1463, 1492-99 (2005).

¹⁵ The American Bankruptcy Institute reported that there were 1,064,927 personal bankruptcy filings in 2008, which corresponds to less than 1% of US households. See Press Release, American Bankruptcy Institute, *Consumer Bankruptcy Filings up Nearly 33 percent in 2008* (January 9, 2009), available at <http://www.abiworld.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Home&TEMPLATE=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm&CONTENTID=56120>. According to the Mortgage Bankers Association, 3.3 percent of mortgages were in the foreclosure process at the end of 2008. See Press Release, Mortgage Bankers Association, *Delinquencies and Foreclosures Continue to Climb in Latest MBA National Delinquency Survey per American* (May 28, 2009), available at <http://www.mortgagebankers.org/NewsandMedia/PressCenter/69031.htm>. The average credit card default was 5.73 percent in August according to Moody's. See *Moody's Credit Card Index Improves in July*, FORBES, August 21, 2009, available at http://www.forbes.com/feeds/ap/2009/08/21/business-us-moody-apos-s-credit-cards_6803326.html. These rates are lower during normal economic times.

¹⁶ Economists explain this pattern of consumer behavior with the permanent income hypothesis according to which people base their consumption expenditures on long-term income trends. See PAUL SAMUELSON & WILLIAM NORDHAUS, *ECONOMICS* 421 (Irwin McGraw-Hill 1998).

¹⁷ The essence of this is the multiplier mechanism where an increase in investment raises the income of consumers and thereby leads to a cascading chain of further spending increases. See *id.* at 446-54.

¹⁸ See Aghion Philippe, Abhijit V. Banerjee, George-Marios Angeletos & Kalina B. Manova, *Volatility and Growth: Credit Constraints and Productivity-Enhancing Investment* (MIT Department of Economics Working Paper No. 05-15, April 30, 2005), available at <http://ssrn.com/abstract=719772> (finding that "tighter financial constraints make R&D investment and growth more sensitive to shocks, while also generating a more negative correlation between volatility and growth to both higher aggregate volatility" for a panel of countries over the period 1960-2000).

to repay loans if they know they can avoid repayment as a result of debt relief laws, rules and programs, and possible lender forbearance).

The risks to lenders from adverse selection, asymmetric information and moral hazard tend to result in precautionary limits on the amount of lending—or liquidity—available to consumers. In the extreme, consumers who want to borrow cannot find anyone to lend to them. Centuries ago there was little consumer lending because of the risks of collecting; and there was little borrowing because laws to ensure repayment—and reduce moral hazard—had draconian consequences such as time in debtor prison.¹⁹

Economists use the term “liquidity constraint” to refer to the situation in which an individual cannot receive additional credit at any price. Some households cannot receive any credit at all while other households cannot receive additional credit even though they are willing to pay for it. Over the years consumers have seen the relaxation of these liquidity constraints as a result of the development of financial markets and innovations in the provision of financial products and services that have enabled lenders to better deal with adverse selection, asymmetric information, and moral hazard problems. These developments have benefited members of social and economically disadvantaged groups especially. Over the last several decades the supply of credit has become democratized with, as we will see below, all but the very poorest members of society able to borrow to some degree.

C. Moral Objections to Borrowing and Lending

Not everyone has applauded the democratization of consumer borrowing over the years. There has been an almost constant thread of moral opprobrium to borrowing from various quarters since the early days of our country. During the 19th century as retailers increasingly provided consumer credit various social commentators warned against the practice. One social critic chastised women for the “curious process of reasoning” that led them to buy on installment rather than paying up front.²⁰ By the turn of the 20th century, social commentators warned against the evils of spending and going into debt through morality tales such as *Keeping Up with Lizzie* (which inspired the subsequent comic strip *Keeping up with the Joneses*). As Irving Bacheller’s “*Charge It*” observed in 1912,

¹⁹ Even English landowners did not mortgage their property before the 1600s because if they missed a payment, they forfeited their entire holdings. See generally GIUSEPPE BERTOLA ET AL., THE ECONOMICS OF CONSUMER CREDIT 1-27 (MIT Press 2006).

²⁰ LENDOL CALDER, FINANCING THE AMERICAN DREAM: A CULTURAL HISTORY OF CONSUMER CREDIT 181 (Princeton University Press 2001).

“Credit is the latest ally of the devil. It is the great tempter. It is responsible for half the extravagance of modern life.”²¹ These commentators have argued for public policies to prevent consumers from borrowing.²²

American consumers have largely chosen to ignore this well-meaning advice throughout the nation’s history. They have embraced new forms of credit that enable them to enhance their current standards of living through borrowing. By and large that is an economically sensible response to the shape of lifecycle earnings, and most consumers do so responsibly. As we will see below, the academic scholars who designed the CFPA and are its leading proponents are the intellectual heirs of the social critics who thought that credit is the “great tempter” from which consumers should be restrained and protected.

III. The Democratization of Consumer Lending

Beginning in the early 1980s a number of innovations significantly reduced liquidity constraints thereby enabling more Americans to borrow more.²³ These innovations helped increase credit availability dramatically for members of socially and economically disadvantaged groups thereby democratizing credit. The gaps between credit availability for households headed by upper income white men and credit availability for households headed by single parents, the less well-off, and minorities closed considerably. The expansion in consumer spending also helped fuel economic growth and job creation and helped sustain a long period of economic expansion that started in 1982 with just some minor recessions along the way until the recent financial crisis.

A. Computerized Risk Analysis and Securitization

Innovations in computerized risk analysis and securitization were major developments behind these improvements. Both innovations have become controversial as each played a role in the financial crisis. After we describe these innovations we explain that it was the failure of financial institutions to use these important tools properly rather than a problem with the tools themselves. It is therefore important to preserve the benefits

²¹ IRVING BACHELLER, “CHARGE IT,” OR KEEPING UP WITH HARRY 116 (Harper & Brothers 1912).

²² CALDER, *supra* note 20, at ch.3.

²³ Angela Lyons, *How Credit Access Has Changed Over Time for U.S. Households*, 37 THE JOURNAL OF CONSUMER AFFAIRS 231, 248 (2003).

of these innovations while dealing directly with the problems that were exposed by the financial crisis.

1. Risk Analysis

We mentioned earlier that lenders are reluctant to provide credit to individuals because of adverse selection, asymmetric information, and moral hazard problems. Advances in risk analysis over the last three decades have steadily reduced the severity of these problems. Those advances have resulted from a combination of the information technology revolution (which has provided more and cheaper computer power), the increased availability of credit-related data on individuals, and the development of sophisticated algorithms for predicting risk.²⁴

Sophisticated “automatic underwriting” of loans began with credit cards. These loans are unsecured and are therefore very risky. There were significant defaults when credit cards were first issued en masse in the 1970s. Fair-Isaac was one of several companies to develop credit scores based on mathematical models that credit card lenders and others could use as inputs into their risk assessment models. Its “FICO” score, developed in the 1980s, became the standard measure for credit risk.²⁵ Some large lenders developed their own scoring systems based on public information as well as relevant proprietary information they have available for clients.²⁶ As we document below, steady refinements of these risk assessment models have proved critical in enabling credit card issuers to expand credit to an ever wider group of Americans.

Automatic underwriting was adopted by the mortgage industry in the mid 1990s. Before then all mortgages were evaluated by hand based on various guidelines. Automatic underwriting based on statistical models of credit default caught on quickly. By 2000, 60-

²⁴ Robert M. Hunt, *A Century Of Consumer Credit Reporting In America* (Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia, Working Paper, June 2005), available at http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=757929. See also Ben S. Bernanke, Chairman, Fed. Reserve, Financial Innovation and Consumer Protection, Keynote Address at the Federal Reserve System’s Sixth Biennial Community Affairs Research Conference (April 17, 2009), available at <http://www.federalreserve.gov/newsevents/speech/bernanke20090417a.htm>.

²⁵ The FICO scoring system compiles information from a variety of sources such as public record, credit application reports and awards points, using mathematical models, for a number of factors that can help predict the likelihood of a person repaying debts on time, e.g. length of credit history, types of credit used, amounts owed. The total number of these points -- the credit score -- predicts how creditworthy a person is. See History of Fair Isaac Corporation, <http://www.fico.com/en/Company/Pages/history.aspx> (last visited Sept. 6, 2009).

²⁶ Consumer Federation of America, Fair Isaac Corporation, Your Credit Score, http://www.pueblo.gsa.gov/cic_text/money/creditscores/your.htm (last visited Sept. 6, 2009).

70 percent of loans were evaluated based on these techniques.²⁷ Several factors were important to the growth of these automated risk analysis for mortgages. Studies found that the automatic techniques were able to identify reliably a larger pool of credit-worthy candidates and do so at lower cost than human underwriters. These automated techniques also enabled the lenders to better verify origination decisions and to reduce adverse selection problems. These techniques further reduced opportunities for discrimination against minorities because the algorithms were “color blind” and did not factor race or ethnicity information into the calculus. The significant expansion in mortgage lending to African Americans that we document below was due at least in part to the development of these techniques.²⁸

Other types of credit also benefited from the development of sophisticated risk analysis. Overdraft protection, which allows consumers to receive an advance from the bank when a check they wrote is for more than the available funds in their account, has also benefited from technological innovation. Historically, financial institutions relied primarily on individual judgment to guide whether to pay checks that would overdraw a consumer’s account. Recently, however, this process has been automated by financial institutions. Customers who meet the bank’s predetermined thresholds, which are based on the bank’s risk analysis, are approved instantly. The speed and the relatively low cost of automated approval also allowed banks to extend this service to non-check transactions including ATM withdrawals and debit card transactions. As Federal Reserve Board Chairman Bernanke remarked: “Although institutions usually charged the same amount when they paid an overdraft as when they returned the check unpaid, many consumers appreciated this service because it saved them from additional merchant fees and the embarrassment of a bounced check.”²⁹ Of course, there are legitimate controversies over whether consumers receive adequate notification of the fees they pay for overdraft protection. But consumers largely benefit from not being embarrassed or being unable to complete a purchase when their checking account balances are temporarily low.

Automobile loans have also become more accessible to consumers because of developments in credit scoring and risk analysis. For example, the process for approving an auto loan has been reduced to hours or minutes instead of days and weeks. By 2001, 84

²⁷ John W. Straka, *A Shift in the Mortgage Landscape: The 1990s Move to Automated Credit Evaluations*, 11 JOURNAL OF HOUSING RESEARCH 207, 216 (2000), available at http://www.knowledgeplex.org/kp/text_document_summary/scholarly_article/refiles/jhr_1102_straka.pdf.

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ See Bernanke, *supra* note 24, at 1.

percent of automobile loan applicants in the United States received a decision within an hour while 23 percent of applicants received a decision in less than 10 minutes.³⁰

2. Securitization

Before the development of securitization lenders generally held onto loans they made. That limited total bank lending to a multiple of their capital and also exposed these lenders to considerable variety of risks—such as events like a plant closing in the community served by a small bank—that affected many of the loans in the lenders’ portfolios. With securitization the originators of loans were able to sell off some or all of their loans to other market participants and thereby diversify their risks. Moreover, by creating a security instrument that consisted of a portfolio of loans it became possible to sell these instruments to the global capital markets. That increased the supply of funds that was available for lending. With the loan removed from the bank’s books, the bank had funds freed up to lend to another customer.

Securitization has experienced tremendous growth since it was introduced in the 1970s, expanding from mortgage loans to encompass a wide range of financial assets, including, automobile loans and leases, student loans, credit card loans and small business loans. The value of outstanding mortgage based securities increased from \$6.6 trillion in 2004 to \$8.9 trillion in 2008 in constant 2008 dollars.³¹ Similarly, securitization of other types of loans such as auto, credit card, home equity, manufacturing, and student loans grew from \$528 billion in 1996 to \$2.7 trillion in 2008 in constant 2008 dollars.³²

3. Breakdowns in the Subprime Mortgage Market

The subprime mortgage crisis revealed significant breakdowns in the application by financial institutions of both risk analysis and securitization. Loan-to-value ratios

³⁰ Michael E. Staten & Fred H. Cate, *The Impact of National Credit Reporting Under the Fair Credit Reporting Act: The Risk of New Restrictions and State Regulation* (Financial Service Coordinating Council, Working Paper, 2003), available at <http://www.sifma.org/regulatory/privacy/pdf/FSCCBenefitsCreditReporting.pdf>.

³¹ Securities Industry and Financial Markets Association, *Mortgage-Backed Securities Outstanding*, http://www.sifma.org/uploadedFiles/Research/Statistics/SIFMA_USMortgageRelatedOutstanding.pdf (last visited Sept. 6, 2009). Numbers are converted into constant 2008 dollars using GDP deflator series from the Gross Domestic Product: Implicit Price Deflator. See Bureau of Economic Analysis, *Gross Domestic Product: Implicit Price Deflator*, <http://research.stlouisfed.org/fred2/data/GDPDEF.txt> (last visited Sep. 10, 2009), available at <http://research.stlouisfed.org/fred2/data/GDPDEF.txt> (outlining data last updated August 27, 2009).

³² Securities Industry and Financial Markets Association, *Asset-Backed Securities Outstanding*, http://www.sifma.org/research/pdf/ABS_Outstanding.pdf (last visited Sept. 6, 2009). Numbers are converted into constant 2008 dollars using GDP deflator series from the Gross Domestic Product: Implicit Price Deflator. See Bureau of Economic Analysis, *Gross Domestic Product: Implicit Price Deflator* (last visited Sep. 10, 2009) (outlining data last updated August 27, 2009).

increased, a greater fraction of households received mortgages that were interest only, and more households received mortgages without having full documentation. Mortgage brokers who were paid on commission increasingly looked the other way in putting applications through.³³ Most importantly, the financial institutions that purchased these subprime mortgages and packaged them into securities, the credit agencies that rated these securities, and the investors who bought these securities did not account for the possibility of a significant slowdown or decline in the change in housing prices. A broad-based decline in housing prices cannot be diversified away by pooling mortgages because all of these loans would be affected by this “correlated risk”. The decline in housing prices combined with the fact that many of the sub-prime mortgages needed to be refinanced after two to three years resulted in a massive increase in defaults. The foreclosure rate for adjustable rate subprime mortgages increased from a low 3 percent in 2005 to over 8 percent in 2007.³⁴

The problems from the increase in default rates were exacerbated by the fact that many of the large financial institutions that packaged the loans kept a significant portion of the loans on their own books rather than selling them into the global markets as the basic thesis of securitization suggested they should have done.³⁵ These institutions therefore had a concentration of what had become toxic assets.³⁶

In conclusion, this review of enhanced risk analysis and securitization has shown that these innovations helped expand the supply of credit overall and made it available to an ever wider portion of the American public. As the Chairman of the Federal Trade Commission noted, “Many fail to appreciate that the average American today enjoys access to credit and financial services, shopping choices, and educational resources that earlier Americans could never have imagined.”³⁷ Before we document these effects we

³³ It appears, however, that the financial markets took these individual risks into account by demanding significant interest rate premiums on these loans that could cover significant defaults. What they did not take into account was the possibility of declines in housing prices that would result in correlated risks across individuals. For a lengthier discussion of this topic, see Dwight M. Jaffee, *The U.S. Subprime Mortgage Crisis: Issues Raised and Lessons Learned* (Commission on Growth and Development, Working Paper, 2008), available at <http://www.growthcommission.org/storage/cgdev/documents/gewp028web.pdf>.

³⁴ STAFF OF J. ECON. COMM., 110TH CONG., THE SUBPRIME LENDING CRISIS, REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS BY THE MAJORITY STAFF OF THE JOINT ECONOMIC COMMITTEE 27 (Comm. Print. 2007), available at <http://www.gfoa.org/downloads/CongressSubprimeReport.pdf>. For more information on default details rates of subprime loans by origination year, see James R. Barth, Tong Li, Triphon Phumiwasana & Glenn Yago, *Perspectives on the Subprime Market* (Milken Institute Working Paper, January 2008), available at <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1070404>.

³⁵ See Dwight Jaffee, *supra* note 33, at 28. See also Dwight M. Jaffee et al., *Mortgage Origination and Securitization in Financial Crisis*, in RESTORING FINANCIAL STABILITY: HOW TO REPAIR A FAILED SYSTEM 72 (Wiley Finance 2009).

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ Timothy J. Muris, Chairman, Fed. Trade Comm’n, Protecting Consumers’ Privacy: Goals and Accomplishments, Remarks at the Networked Economy Summit (June 11, 2002), available at <http://www.ftc.gov/speeches/muris/gmason.shtm>.

describe additional innovations for several important types of consumer financial products.

B. Financial Innovations for Individual Consumer Financial Products and Services

1. Mortgages

Although consumers could easily finance the purchase of sewing machines by the early 20th century they still had great difficulty financing the purchase of homes. Residential mortgages were only available for 5-10 years after which the principal became due and the borrower had to refinance.³⁸ Rates were variable and loan-to-value ratios were below 50 percent. Relatively few Americans could finance the purchase of homes. This situation changed largely as a result of the creation of federally sponsored mortgage insurance in response to the housing collapse following the 1929 stock market crash.³⁹ This insurance enabled banks to issue long-term fixed rates mortgages. After World War II these new mortgages enabled millions of Americans to finance homes during the economic expansion that started in the early 1950s. The number of American households who owned homes increased from 23.9 million in 1950 to 36.3 million in 1965 to 78.7 million in 2008. Increases in the supply of mortgage lending successively enabled the post-World War II generation, the large baby boom generation, and the Generation X to buy and finance homes.

The stagflation years of the 1970s had brought considerable problems to the housing market. High interest rates led depositors to move funds from banks that had regulatory ceilings on the rates they could pay depositors to treasury securities and other instruments. Depositors had been a major source of mortgage funding. At the same time high interest rates on fixed rate mortgages put home ownership out of reach of many Americans. Efforts to introduce adjustable rate mortgages during the 1970s met with considerable opposition from consumer groups and regulators imposed tight restrictions on allowable changes in the interest rates.⁴⁰ As a result many Americans who wanted to

³⁸ Richard K. Green & Susan M. Wachter, *The American Mortgage in Historical and International Context*, 19 JOURNAL OF ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVES 93 (2005).

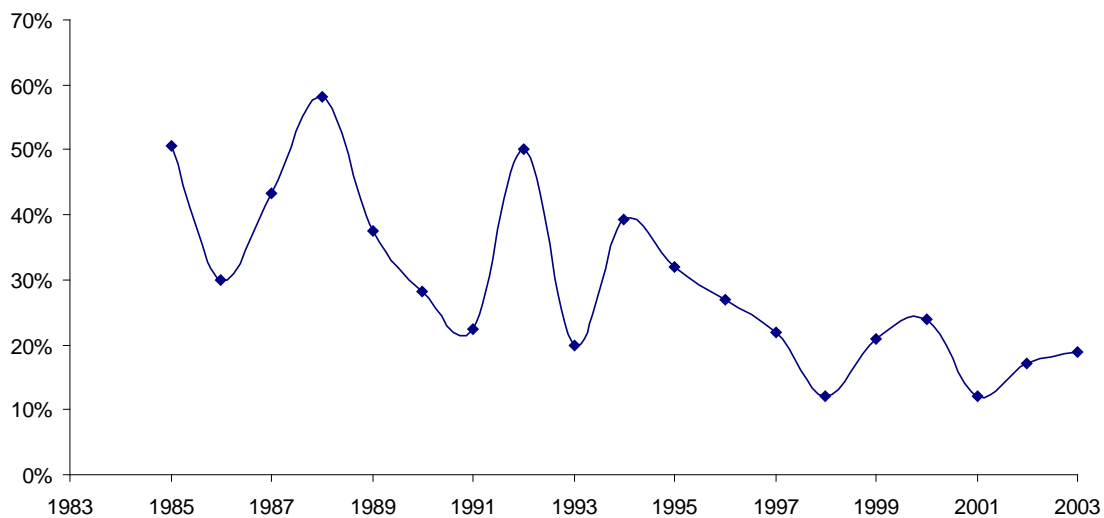
³⁹ As with the current crisis, housing prices fell, leading homeowners to walk away from their loans which resulted in banks selling foreclosed homes and further driving down home prices.

⁴⁰ Kristopher Gerardi, Harvey S. Rosen & Paul Willen, *Do Households Benefit from Financial Deregulation and Innovation? The Case of the Mortgage Market* (Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, Public Policy Discussion Papers, June 2006), available at <http://www.bos.frb.org/economic/ppdp/2006/ppdp066.pdf>.

buy homes were not able to do so at fixed rate mortgage terms. They were liquidity constrained.⁴¹

Although inflation was tamed by the early 1980s, and interest rates began coming down significantly thereafter, there was concern that the future would bring significant volatility in interest rates that would put lenders at risk and thereby curtail mortgage lending to households. The main innovation that was introduced was the 30 year adjustable rate mortgage (ARMs) that would allow mortgage earnings to keep pace with the cost to lenders of funding those mortgages.⁴² Home purchasers found these mortgages appealing because they were usually set at short-term interest rates which were substantially lower than long-term interest rates which reflected risk premiums for future inflation. Over the course of the 1980s a significant part of new mortgage loans were ARMs, reaching a peak of 58 percent in 1988 as shown in Figure 3. Many households benefited from the ARMs because interest rates ended up declining in subsequent years.

Figure 3. Loans with adjustable mortgage rates as proportion of all loans, 1984-2003.



Source: Monthly Interest Rate Survey, Table 34, Federal Housing Finance Board; <http://www.fhfa.gov/Default.aspx?Page=252>.

As long-term interest rates declined more home buyers and households who were refinancing mortgages shifted back to fixed rate mortgages.

Other innovations were also introduced. These included ARMs with fixed interest rates for several years, graduated payment mortgages, mortgages that allowed initial

⁴¹ Many lenders holding portfolios of fixed rate mortgages sustained major losses when interest rates climbed and the rates they paid for funds were well above what they earned. The interest rate inversion of the last years of the 1970s and the first years of the 1980s was at the core of the savings and loan crisis of the 1980s.

⁴² Congressional legislation was passed in 1981 to allow S&Ls to invest in ARMs which stimulated their supply.

payments to fall below interest charges, and low down payment mortgages. As Professor Jaffee observes, “These mortgages were all designed to meet specific needs: option mortgages for borrowers with widely fluctuating incomes, converting ARMs for borrowers who expect a rising income profile, and so on.”⁴³

Securitization was another major innovation in the mortgage industry. It was responsible for expanding the source of capital to make it possible for millions of young Americans coming into the labor market and forming households to buy homes. Freddie Mac was created in 1970 and was charged with creating a more liquid market for mortgages.⁴⁴ Mortgage-backed securities emerged and started becoming popular in the 1980s. These securities allowed financial institutions to better diversify their risks by selling some portion of mortgage loans they had originated. As importantly, they broke the dependence of the supply of mortgages on the supply of deposits. Banks could receive compensation for originating and then servicing loans by selling mortgage backed securities. The mortgage originators increasingly became intermediaries between mortgage borrowers and the global capital markets which vastly expanded the amount of liquidity available to borrowers.⁴⁵

A significant portion of the American population was, nevertheless, still unable to get mortgages in the 1980s. Lower income individuals, people who had not established a credit history possibly because of having faced adverse economic circumstances, and people with poor credit histories were shut out of the mortgage lending market. They comprised a substantial portion of the 20 percent of households that were liquidity constrained. The U.S. government encouraged financial institutions to expand lending to these groups for a variety of policy reasons.⁴⁶ Computerized risk analysis and securitization made the expansion of lending to this underserved part of the population possible.

Subprime mortgages expanded in the last half of the 1990s and especially rapidly in the first half of the 2000s. In 1994, only 5 percent of the mortgages that were originated were subprime. Subprime originations grew to 13 percent in 2000 and reached 20 percent

⁴³ See Jaffee, *supra* note 33, at 14.

⁴⁴ See Freddie Mac Corporate History, http://www.freddiemac.com/news/corp_facts.html (last visited Sept. 6, 2009).

⁴⁵ Between 1980 and 2008 the share of home mortgages that were held by the originating institution declined from 89 percent to 41 percent. Meanwhile, the share of mortgages that were securitized increased from 11 percent to 59 percent. See James R. Barth et al., *Mortgage Market Turmoil: The Role of Interest-Rate Resets*, 2 GH BANK HOUSING JOURNAL 17 (2007), at 24.

⁴⁶ Lyons, *supra* note 23, at 231-32.

in 2005 and 2006.⁴⁷ Then the housing bubble burst. Subprime originations declined sharply falling to less than 1 percent of all originations in the last quarter of 2008. Although there were serious problems in the subprime mortgage market, as we discuss below, these mortgages helped a significant number of socially and economically disadvantage households, who had not had access to credit, to buy their homes. More importantly, going forward, it is essential to distinguish between subprime mortgage lending and the housing bust. Housing prices will eventually reach a new equilibrium that reflects their fundamental value and may have normal appreciation after that.⁴⁸ So long as subprime mortgages reflect the realities of the housing market, they can enable many socially and economically disadvantaged individuals to obtain home loans that they would not otherwise be able to get.

2. Non-Mortgage Lending

As discussed, consumers borrow money to help smooth out consumption and income over their lifecycles. Importantly they borrow to purchase consumer durables ranging from televisions to automobiles. American consumers have seen over the nation's history a steady increase in their ability to borrow to finance current consumption as a result of innovations in consumer financial products and services. These innovations have provided more and cheaper credit to consumers over time. With each new innovation more credit worthy borrowers have been able to move from more to less expensive forms of credit as we show below.

During the great economic expansion of the 19th century, American consumers saw rising incomes over their lifetimes and enjoyed an increasing array of consumer products available to them.⁴⁹ As the century progressed, retailers became significant providers of credit to consumers. Retailers allowed customers to put purchases on a "house charge" to be paid at the end of the month and they sold products on installment plans that allowed consumers to pay over time.⁵⁰ As of 1929, retailers were the primary suppliers of consumer credit accounting for more than 60 percent of consumer credit with financial

⁴⁷ Barth et al., *supra* note 34, at 3.

⁴⁸ Between June 2001 and July 2009 home prices appreciated at the rate of inflation with the gains from the boom being largely offset by the bust. See Floyd Norris, *After a Bumpy Ride, Back at Square One*, N.Y. TIMES, August 28, 2009.

⁴⁹ See BERTOLA ET AL., *supra* note 19, at ch. 9.

⁵⁰ Until 1916 most states had usury laws that limited the ability of financial institutions to lend profitably to consumers. Retailers could effectively lend, and bypass these usury laws, by including the cost of the loan (including the risks of nonpayment) in the purchase price. See, e.g., *id.*

institutions providing the remainder.⁵¹ A fifth of retail sales were carried on open accounts—a type of revolving credit—by 1929 and that share remained roughly steady until after World War II.⁵² Retail credit was expensive by modern standards.⁵³

Retail credit was also limited and highly restricted. Retailers gave customers identification cards that they could use when they charged merchandise. But generally these cards could only be used to pay at the retailer that issued the card or in some cases groups of retailers that agreed to use a common card. A key innovation occurred in 1950 when Diners Club introduced the general-purpose charge card which consumers could use at many unrelated merchants. Diners Club provided the financing for the merchant and collected from the cardholder. Like the house charge programs the cardholder paid at the end of the month. American Express introduced a similar product in 1958. Charge cards were widely accepted by merchants and carried by millions of Americans—principally well-off businessmen—by the end of the 1950s.

In 1958, Bank of America introduced the modern general-purpose credit card. It allowed consumers to finance their purchases over time on a revolving line of credit. This feature substituted for the various credit programs offered by retailers. At the time Bank of America could only operate in California because of interstate banking regulations. Similar cards were introduced by other banks around the country. The modern credit card industry did not really take off until the early 1980s. State usury laws had significantly constrained the expansion of credit cards during the 1970s because the cost of capital was too high to enable banks to profitably extend credit at the interest rates allowed in many states.⁵⁴ A Supreme Court decision allowed banks to issue nationally without being subject to these state restrictions.⁵⁵ That decision, together with the economic expansion that began in the early 1980s, allowed the development of a robust national market for credit cards.

Over time computerized risk analysis and securitization both became important factors in helping to increase the supply of revolving credit. Crude risk analysis methods tended to deny many people credit who failed to meet certain thresholds. More refined risk analysis made it possible to issue credit to a wider group of individuals. These individuals

⁵¹ BERTOLA ET AL., *supra* note 19, at 309.

⁵² *Id.*

⁵³ See BERTOLA ET AL., *supra* note 19, at 308.

⁵⁴ Christopher C. DeMuth, *The Case Against Credit Card Interest Rate Regulation*, 3 YALE J. ON REG 201 (1986).

⁵⁵ *Marquette Nat'l Bank of Minneapolis v. First of Omaha Service Corp.*, 439 U.S. 299, 318 (1978).

usually paid higher fees including interest rates because they had greater expected default rates and other payment-related problems on average. Lenders developed various pricing plans to accommodate these expanding categories of borrowers.

The increased availability of credit cards has also provided significant benefits to small businesses. Almost half of firms with fewer than 20 employees use personal credit cards to help finance their businesses.⁵⁶ That has enabled small businesses, especially new ones that do not have a significant credit history, to obtain sources of working capital as well as longer term loans.⁵⁷ Smaller retailers have also benefited from the expansion of credit cards. Larger retailers can afford to offer store cards along with other lending programs such as installment sales. Smaller firms typically lack the financial resources or the scale to offer their consumers credit. The widespread availability of consumer credit from third parties has therefore benefited smaller retailers and helped level the playing field with larger retailers.⁵⁸

There are controversies on whether Americans took on too much debt as a result of the availability of credit cards and over some of the pricing practices of the card issuers. These are valid concerns that lie outside the scope of this paper and which have been addressed by recent legislation and regulation. However, we think it is important to recognize that despite these issues a vast number of Americans have benefited from expanded access to loans which has enabled them to deal with emergencies and smooth out consumption over their lifecycles. As we note below, it also enabled them to shift borrowing from more expensive retail loans. For example, if credit cards were banned, or sharply curtailed, today many consumers would be buying furniture on installment plans from retailers and paying much more in the end than they pay with credit cards. Other consumers would turn to payday lenders, pawn shops, and loan sharks.

Another major innovation was home equity loans. These were introduced in the late 1970s.⁵⁹ Many households had realized large increases in the value of their homes. But their investments in their homes were illiquid. To borrow, these households used primarily credit vehicles, such as credit cards, that did not require collateral and therefore

⁵⁶ BOARD OF GOVERNORS OF THE FEDERAL RESERVE SYSTEM, 110TH CONG., REPORT TO THE CONGRESS ON THE AVAILABILITY OF CREDIT TO SMALL BUSINESSES 30 (2007). 46.7 percent of businesses with fewer than 500 employees rely upon personal credit cards. *Id.*

⁵⁷ See DAVID S. EVANS & RICHARD SCHMALENSEE, PAYING WITH PLASTIC: THE DIGITAL REVOLUTION IN BUYING AND BORROWING, 107-114 (MIT Press 2005); David Blanchflower & David S. Evans, *The Role of Credit Cards in Providing Financing for Small Businesses*, 77 THE PAYMENT CARD ECONOMICS REVIEW 77 (Winter 2004), available at <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1474450>.

⁵⁸ Evans & Schmalensee, *supra* note 57, at ch.3.

⁵⁹ Louise Story, *Home Equity Frenzy Was a Bank Ad Come True*, N.Y. TIMES, August 15, 2008, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/15/business/15sell.html>.

had relatively high interest rates. The home equity loan allowed them to borrow against the equity they had built up in their houses and at lower rates than many other forms of credit since the house served as collateral. The value of home equity lines increased from around \$322 billion in 1990 to over \$1.1 trillion in 2008 in constant 2008 dollars.⁶⁰

Computerized risk analysis and securitization facilitated the expansion of other forms of credit from the early 1980s to the present. For example, automobile loans, for which the loan-to value ratio is typically around 90 percent, increased from about \$254 billion in 1980 to \$584 billion in 1999 in constant 2008 dollars.⁶¹

The expansion of non-mortgage credit as a result of the introduction of innovative methods of lending has enabled consumers to substitute less expensive for more expensive forms of credit. Although there is no hard evidence we are aware of, it is likely that the introduction by retailers of house charges and revolving loans reduced the reliance of 19th century consumers on the main alternative forms of credit which were pawn brokers and loan sharks. Charge and credit cards displaced retail credit. Between 1968 and 2008 the fraction of non-mortgage debt from retailers declined from 17 percent to about 2 percent while the fraction based on credit cards increased from 1.3 percent to 38.1 percent of consumer credit.⁶² Credit cards generally offered better financing terms than store programs as well as greater variety and portability. When home equity loans became available consumers substituted this cheaper form of lending for borrowing on credit cards.⁶³ Rates on home equity lines are typically lower than those on credit cards, and also offer tax benefits.⁶⁴ This made borrowing against a person's existing home for non-housing consumption more common.⁶⁵ Of course, as housing values have declined we would expect home equity loans will as well and consumers will trend back to cards.

⁶⁰ Press Release, Federal Reserve Board of Governors, Flow of Funds Accounts of the United States (Sept. 18, 2008), *available at* <http://www.federalreserve.gov/releases/z1>. Numbers are converted into constant 2008 dollars using GDP deflator series from Gross Domestic Product: Implicit Price Deflator, Bureau of Economic Analysis, last updated August 27, 2009 *available at* <http://research.stlouisfed.org/fred2/data/GDPDEF.txt>

⁶¹ For 1980 numbers, *see* Economic Research, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, Series: AUTONS, Total Automobile Credit Outstanding, *available at* <http://research.stlouisfed.org/fred2/series/AUTONS>. For 1999 numbers *see* Federal Reserve Statistical Release G19 (June 7, 1999), *available at* <http://www.federalreserve.gov/releases/g19/19990607/>. Numbers are converted into constant 2008 dollars using GDP deflator series from Gross Domestic Product: Implicit Price Deflator, Bureau of Economic Analysis, last updated August 27, 2009 *available at* <http://research.stlouisfed.org/fred2/data/GDPDEF.txt>. More recent data on the total amount of automobile loans outstanding are not publicly available.

⁶² Reserve Statistical Release G19, Consumer Credit Historical Data, *available at* <http://www.federalreserve.gov/releases/g19/hist/>.

⁶³ Michael E. Staten, *Consumer Debt: Myths about the Impact of the Recession*, Credit Research Center Reprint #21 (Autumn 1993).

⁶⁴ According to Bloomberg, the average lowest credit card rate was 11.25 percent as of Aug 19, 2009 while the rate for home equity loans was 8.55 percent according to bankrate.com. Jeff Plungis, *Consumer Gains on Credit-Card Law Pared by Rate Hikes*, BLOOMBERG.COM, August 19, 2009, *available at* <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20670001&sid=aBKk081ypy4>.

⁶⁵ Barry Z. Cynamon & Steve M. Fazzari, *Household Debt in the Consumer Age: Source of Growth- Risk of Collapse*, 3 CAPITALISM AND SOCIETY (2008).

C. The Effects of Financial Innovation on the Expansion and Democratization of Credit

These financial innovations have helped relax liquidity constraints on millions of Americans who would not have been able to get credit or would not have been able to get as much credit as they wanted. Professor Lyons found that in 1998 American households were able to obtain 68.3 percent of the credit they wanted up from 55.5 percent in 1983.⁶⁶ That trend has likely continued to the present given the effects of the innovations discussed above. As we demonstrate, access to credit has expanded to the socially and economically groups that are most likely to be liquidity constrained.

1. Home Ownership

The growth rate in home ownership for several socially and economically disadvantaged groups increased more rapidly than the growth rate for better situated groups between the late 1980s and the late 2000s. Between 1995 and 2008 the rate of growth of home ownership for African Americans was 11.0 percent and that of Hispanics was 16.6 percent compared to 5.8 percent for whites.⁶⁷

Individuals in the bottom fifth of the income distribution have experienced an increase in home ownership as a result of greater access to capital. Between 1989 and 2007, as shown in Table 1, the percent of families who owned a primary residence in the bottom quintile of the income distribution increased from 32.9 to 41.4 percent (a change of 8.5 percentage points); that compares with an increase from 65.4 to 69.3 percent (a change of 3.9 percentage points) for households in the middle quintile of the income distribution. Thus the increase in home ownership was almost twice as high for the low as for the middle income group. The gap between the poorest and middle income category decreased from 32.5 percent points (65.4-32.9) to 27.9 percentage points.

The percent of home ownership for single parents increased from 42.7 percent to 49.1 percent (falling from a peak of 54.5 percent in 2004 before the housing collapse started) while percent of home ownership among couples with children remained roughly constant between 1989 and 2007 (changing from 77.5 percent to 78.0 percent). The

⁶⁶ Lyons, *supra* note 23, at 248.

⁶⁷ The percentage of African American homeowners grew from 42.7 percent in 1995 to 47.4 percent in 2008, the percentage of Hispanic homeowners grew from 42.1 percent to 49.1 percent while the percentage of white homeowners increased from 70.9 percent to 75 percent. See U.S. Census, Homeownership Rates by Race and Ethnicity of Householder: 1994 to 2008, *available at* www.census.gov/hhes/www/housing/hvs/annual08/ann08t22.xls.

increase of 6.4 percentage points in home ownership for single parents was more than 12 times higher than the 0.5 percentage point increase for parents with children.

Table 1. Percent of families with primary residence, by racial, family structure, and income characteristics

Year	Race or ethnicity		Family structure		Percentile of income		Age of head	
	White, non Hispanic	Nonwhite or Hispanic	Single with children	Couple with children	Bottom	Middle	< 35	45 - 54
1989	70.5	44.4	42.7	77.5	32.9	65.4	39.4	76.5
1992	70.3	44.4	43.0	74.6	38.9	61.8	36.8	75.4
1995	70.6	44.3	46.8	74.6	39.7	62.6	37.9	75.3
1998	72.0	47.2	46.9	79.1	38.8	67.3	38.9	74.4
2001	74.3	47.3	48.5	78.7	40.6	66.0	39.9	76.2
2004	76.1	50.8	54.5	77.8	40.3	71.6	41.6	77.3
2007	75.6	51.9	49.1	78.0	41.4	69.3	40.7	77.3

Note: Bottom percentile is for people in the lowest 20 percent and middle quintile is for people in 40-59 percent range. Source: 2007 Survey of Consumer Finance, The Federal Reserve Board (June 15, 2009), available at <http://www.federalreserve.gov/pubs/oss/oss2/2007/2007%20SCF%20Chartbook.pdf>.

Between 1989 and 2007 all groups experienced an increase in the value of their homes. As reported by the Survey of Consumer Finances, the gap between the value of the homes afforded by lower and middle class people shrunk between 1989 and 2007.⁶⁸ In 1989 the average value of the home for the lowest income quintile was half of the price of the middle quintiles.⁶⁹ In 2007, the median home value for the lowest quintile is only 50 percent lower than that for the middle.⁷⁰ The median value of the home owned by African Americans and Hispanics increased by 125 percent compared to an increase of only 66 percent for the value of homes owned by white people.⁷¹

These increases in home ownership were made possible because of the increased availability of mortgage finance. Table 2 shows the percent of households with mortgages or home equity loans for each of the groups discussed above. Between 1989 and 2007 the share of Hispanics and African Americans with mortgages increased 10.6 percentage points (39.2-28.6) compared to an increase of 7.2 percent points for white. Similarly, the percent of lower income people with mortgages almost doubled from 7.5 percent to 13.7 percent.

⁶⁸ Federal Reserve Board of Governors, Survey of Consumer Finance, 1992-2007, <http://www.federalreserve.gov/pubs/oss/oss2/scfindex.html> (last visited Sep. 29, 2009).

⁶⁹ *Id.*

⁷⁰ *Id.*

⁷¹ *Id.*

Table 2. Percent of families with mortgages or home-equity

Year	Race or ethnicity		Family structure		Percentile of income		Age of head	
	White, non Hispanic	Nonwhite or Hispanic	Single with children	Couple with children	Bottom	Middle	< 35	45 - 54
1989	42.0	28.6	30.8	62.2	7.5	37.3	34.9	56.9
1992	42.1	27.3	28.3	63.2	10.4	35.4	30.9	59.4
1995	43.3	30.2	32.0	63.0	10.4	37.7	32.9	61.1
1998	45.5	30.3	28.9	65.5	10.8	42.5	32.9	57.6
2001	46.1	35.1	34.1	67.0	12.8	43.1	35.6	58.7
2004	49.7	36.3	41.3	66.5	14.6	50	37.7	62.5
2007	49.2	39.2	37.0	67.8	13.7	48.8	37.1	63.8

Note: Bottom percentile is for people in the lowest 20 percent and middle quintile is for people in 40-59 percent range.

Source: 2007 Survey of Consumer Finance, The Federal Reserve Board (June 15, 2009), available at <http://www.federalreserve.gov/pubs/oss/oss2/2007/2007%20SCF%20Chartbook.pdf>.

2. Access to Non-Housing Credit

Socially and economically disadvantaged groups also secured greater access to non-mortgage credit between 1989 and 2007. Tables 3-6 summarize the changes and overall growth rates for the groups discussed above for automobile ownership, education loans, credit card loans and home equity loans.

Between 1989 and 2007 the percentage of non-white households with automobile loans increased from 29.3 percent to 33.3 percent while the share of white households with auto loans decreased slightly following a peak of 37.4 percent in 2004 (see Table 3). The share of single parents with vehicles loans increased from 26.9 percent to 28.3 percent while the share of married couples with car loans dropped to 50.4 percent following an increase to 51.1 percent in 2004. Similar observations can be made for lower income and younger people.

Table 3. Percent of families with vehicle installment loans

Year	Race or ethnicity		Family structure		Percentile of income		Age of head	
	White, non Hispanic	Nonwhite or Hispanic	Single with children	Couple with children	Bottom	Middle	< 35	45 - 54
1989	36.6	29.3	26.9	50.7	11.5	41.5	37.8	47.6
1992	31.4	24.9	25.1	44.1	10.0	33.5	36.6	34.6
1995	32.9	27.6	24.0	47.6	11.2	34.3	40.1	37.9
1998	32.0	29.4	27.1	44.2	12.4	37.1	36.9	40.1
2001	35.9	32.1	34.5	50.9	12.3	42.0	45.0	37.8
2004	37.4	30.9	30.9	51.1	12.8	43.6	41.3	39.0
2007	35.5	33.3	28.3	50.4	13.0	41.1	44.3	39.1

Note: Bottom percentile is for people in the lowest 20 percent and middle quintile is for people in 40-59 percent range.

Source: 2007 Survey of Consumer Finance, The Federal Reserve Board (June 15, 2009), available at <http://www.federalreserve.gov/pubs/oss/oss2/2007/2007%20SCF%20Chartbook.pdf>.

The increased access to credit also provided minority groups with improved access to education loans as evidenced by Table 4. Between 1989 and 2007 the proportion of non-white households holding education loans increased 7.7 percent points (from 10.8 percent to 18.5 percent) compared with an increase of only 5.6 percent points for white (from 8.3 percent to 13.9 percent).

Table 4. Percent of families with education installment loans

Year	Race or ethnicity		Family structure		Percentile of income	
	White, non Hispanic	Nonwhite or Hispanic	Single with children	Couple with children	Bottom	Middle
1989	8.3	10.8	17.0	8.9	8.4	7.7
1992	10.8	10.3	15.0	13.5	10.6	14.1
1995	11.6	12.7	13.7	17.3	9.5	11.4
1998	11.4	11.4	13.6	14.4	9.9	11.7
2001	11.2	13.5	14.3	14.9	7.7	13.6
2004	13.7	12.9	14.4	18.0	10.9	15.8
2007	13.9	18.5	20.2	20.7	10.7	16.6

Note: Bottom percentile is for people in the lowest 20 percent and middle quintile is for people in 40-59 percent range.
Source: 2007 Survey of Consumer Finance, The Federal Reserve Board (June 15, 2009), available at <http://www.federalreserve.gov/pubs/oss/oss2/2007/2007%20SCF%20Chartbook.pdf>.

The gap between minority groups holding credit cards and the rest of the population also declined. The gap in having revolving credit between white and nonwhite households disappeared between 1989 and 2007. Meanwhile, the gaps between single parents and couples with children and between the lowest and middle income quintiles also declined dramatically over this period as shown on Table 5.

Table 5. Percent of families with credit card balances

Year	Race or ethnicity		Family structure		Percentile of income		Age of head	
	White, non Hispanic	Nonwhite or Hispanic	Single with children	Couple with children	Bottom	Middle	< 35	45 - 54
1989	41.5	34.4	35.6	53.8	15.3	48.9	44.5	49.3
1992	44.2	42.1	43.3	56.0	23.4	51.9	51.8	48.9
1995	47.1	48.0	43.9	60.9	26.0	52.9	54.7	56.4
1998	44.3	43.5	38.0	55.8	24.5	50.1	50.7	52.5
2001	43.3	47.6	48.1	52.4	30.3	52.8	49.6	50.4
2004	46.0	46.7	48.6	56.7	28.8	55.1	47.5	54.0
2007	45.1	48.4	45.1	54.7	25.7	54.9	48.5	53.6

Note: Bottom percentile is for people in the lowest 20 percent and middle quintile is for people in 40-59 percent range.
Source: 2007 Survey of Consumer Finance, The Federal Reserve Board (June 15, 2009), available at <http://www.federalreserve.gov/pubs/oss/oss2/2007/2007%20SCF%20Chartbook.pdf>.

Similar trends are also observed for home equity lines of credit. As homeownership increased and home equity lines of credit became available in the 1980s, more households were taking advantage of their house equity (see Table 6). In 2007, 5.5

percent of non-white households had access to a home equity line versus only 1.2 percent in 1989. From 1989 to 2007 the proportion of single parents with home equity lines increased from 0.8 percent to 6.4 percent. A greater number of younger people were using home equity loans to finance purchases. In 2008 there were 4 percent of people under 35 with home equity lines of credit vs. only 0.8 percent in 1989.

Table 6. Percent of families with home equity lines of credit

Year	Race or ethnicity		Family structure		Percentile of income		Age of head	
	White, non Hispanic	Nonwhite or Hispanic	Single with children	Couple with children	Bottom	Middle	< 35	45 - 54
1989	3.8	1.2	0.8	5.5	0.1	2.4	0.8	6.2
1992	5.2	1.4	1.3	7.0	0.0	3.7	1.1	8.3
1995	3.3	1.4	0.9	4.7	0.0	1.4	1.4	5.1
1998	5.0	2.6	2.7	7.4	0.5	3.3	1.4	7.9
2001	5.7	1.9	2.0	7.3	1.0	3.0	2.9	7.2
2004	10.5	3.6	5.6	13.6	1.3	7.1	3.5	13.1
2007	9.8	5.5	6.4	11.0	1.9	6.9	4.0	11.7

Note: Bottom percentile is for people in the lowest 20 percent and middle quintile is for people in 40-59 percent range.

Source: 2007 Survey of Consumer Finance, The Federal Reserve Board (June 15, 2009), available at <http://www.federalreserve.gov/pubs/oss/oss2/2007/2007%20SCF%20Chartbook.pdf>.

D. The Effects of Financial Innovation on Economic Expansion and Job Growth

The increased supply of credit to households that began in the early 1980s helped fuel economic expansion and job growth for several decades. More credit means more funds available for consumption and investment which then increases demand for goods. To meet the growing demand, firms start producing more goods and hiring more workers which in turn results in higher employment and income for consumers. The increased income further stimulates consumption and supply of goods. Thus, the initial consumption stimulation starts a cascading chain of further spending and increases which leads to an overall economic growth. Economists call this mechanism “the multiplier effect.”⁷²

IV. The Rationale for the Consumer Financial Protection Act of 2009

Although consumer lending has benefited millions of Americans it has not been without its problems. As with almost any industry, some firms engage in unscrupulous or

⁷² For more discussion about the multiplier effect, see generally PAUL SAMUELSON & WILLIAM NORDHAUS, *supra* note 16, at 446.

even fraudulent practices. Some consumers may not get sufficiently accurate or timely information to make well-informed choices for a variety of reasons. The U.S. Congress has passed numerous laws such as the Truth in Lending Act and the FTC Act that regulate various aspects of consumer lending. Various states have also passed laws to protect borrowers, including state consumer protection legislation, usury laws, and restrictions on payday lending and other forms of lending. As a result, consumer lending is extensively regulated in the United States.

The U.S. Department of Treasury has proposed sweeping changes to this system of regulation. In announcing the plan, President Obama said that consumer financial protection was needed because “crisis was not just the result of decisions made by the mightiest of financial firms; it was also the result of decisions made by ordinary Americans to open credit cards and take out home loans and take on other financial obligations.”⁷³ The Treasury Department argued that mortgage and other companies sold products that “were overly complicated and unsuited to borrowers’ financial situation . . . with disastrous results for consumers and the financial system.” The Treasury Department’s report does not, however, provide evidence to support the assertion that failed consumer protection regulation played a significant factor in the financial crisis. There is no evidence that we are aware of that predatory lending or other practices that would violate the consumer protection laws resulted in significant portion of the loss in value of the mortgage backed securities that were at the heart of the financial meltdown.⁷⁴ There is therefore little basis for concluding that increased consumer protection in the

⁷³ Barack Obama, President of the United States, Speech on 21st Century Financial Regulatory Reform (June 17, 2009), *available at* http://www.cfr.org/publication/19658/obamas_speech_on_21st_century_financial_regulatory_reform.html.

⁷⁴ That is not to deny that some consumers were victims of unfair and deceptive practices in securing mortgages and that the regulatory agencies could and should have done a better job regulating that burgeoning subprime mortgage market. There is no evidence that we are aware of, however, that a significant portion of the individuals who defaulted were victims of unscrupulous mortgage practices or that they would have failed to take out mortgages in the absence of these practices. Oren Bar-Gill and Elizabeth Warren have argued that “the high proportion of people with good credit scores who ended up with high-cost mortgages raises the specter that some portion of these consumers were not fully cognizant of the fact that they could have borrowed for much less.” See Oren Bar-Gill & Elizabeth Warren, *Making Credit Safer*, 157 U. PA. L. REV. 1, 39 (2008). They claim that many people who got subprime mortgages could have received less expensive prime mortgages. These authors do not provide any evidence that a significant number of homeowners that defaulted would not have done so had they paid lower interest rates. It is doubtful that there would have been fewer defaults since even with lower interest rates these home owners would have had negative equity in their homes and therefore would gain from defaulting. In addition, a Federal Reserve Bank of Boston study finds that most subprime mortgage borrowers would not have received prime mortgages. Christopher L. Foote, Kristopher S. Gerardi, Lorenz Goette & Paul Willen, *Subprime Facts: What (We Think) We Know about the Subprime Crisis and What We Don’t* (Federal Reserve Board of Boston, Public Policy Discussion Paper No. 08-2, May 30, 2008), *available at* <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1153411>. Deterioration of the underwriting standards has also been put to blame for the current crisis. Another study at the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston found that loans issued in 2005–2006 were not very different from loans made earlier, which, in turn had performed well, despite carrying a variety of serious risk factors. While the 2005–2006 loans may have carried risk factors, such as increased leverage, underwriting standards alone cannot explain the dramatic rise in foreclosures. See Kristopher S. Gerardi, Andreas Lehnert, Shane Sherland & Paul Willen, *Making Sense of the Subprime Crisis* (Federal Reserve Board of Boston, Public Policy Discussion Paper No. 09-1, December 22, 2008), *available at* <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1341853>; Geetesh Bhardwaj & Rajdeep Sengupta, *Where’s the Smoking Gun? A Study of Underwriting Standards for US Subprime Mortgages* (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, Working Paper No. 2008-036B, Apr. 1, 2009), *available at* <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1286106>.

mortgage market would have prevented the financial crisis or that failed consumer protection was a significant cause of the financial crisis or that the changes sought by the CFPB Act would have averted or significantly reduced the harm from the financial crisis.

To the extent an intellectual case has been made for the new agency it has been made by several law professors in a series of articles that appeared in 2008. Their arguments are largely based on a belief that consumers make poor choices when it comes to financial services products and that stronger consumer protection regulation could make these consumers better off by regulating the design of these products, mandating various disclosures, restricting consumer choice, and ‘nudging’ consumers toward certain standardized financial products.

The CFPB Act appears to have evolved from a May 2008 paper written by two law professors: Elizabeth Warren of Harvard, who is currently the head of the Congressional Oversight Panel on TARP funding, and Oren Bar-Gill of New York University.⁷⁵ They identified a series of problems with consumer financial products, argued that existing federal regulatory agencies lack the ability or motivation to deal with these problems, and proposed the creation of a new federal consumer financial protection agency.⁷⁶ Michael Barr, a University of Michigan Law School professor who is now the Assistant Secretary of the Treasury involved in the draft legislation, and several co-authors, expanded upon the proposed Bar-Gill/Warren agency by detailing key aspects of the regulatory approach the agency should take in an October 2008 paper.⁷⁷ Barr et al. proposed requiring that lenders offer standardized products designed by the agency regulators.⁷⁸ Further, Barr et al. would permit individuals to sue lenders if certain substantive terms of financial products, including disclosure terms, were deemed “unreasonable.”⁷⁹ These papers provide the articulated basis for understanding the rationale behind the CFPB as envisioned by its architects, insight into how the new agency would analyze consumer lending products, and a means to predict how the new agency would affect people’s access to consumer credit and their choice of products.

⁷⁵ See Bar-Gill & Warren, *supra* note 74, at 26-27. Bar-Gill and Warren’s case for the CFPB Act relies heavily on their previous work. See, e.g., Oren Bar-Gill, *Seduction By Plastic*, 98 NW. U. L. REV. 1373 (2004); Elizabeth Warren, *Unsafe at Any Rate*, 5 DEMOCRACY: A JOURNAL OF IDEAS, (Summer 2007), available at <http://www.democracyjournal.org/article.php?ID=6528>.

⁷⁶ Bar-Gill & Warren, *supra* note 74, at 26.

⁷⁷ Michael S. Barr, Sendhil Mullainathan, and Eldar Shafir, *Behaviorally Informed Financial Services Regulation 1* (New American Foundation Working Paper, October 2008).

⁷⁸ *Id.* at 7-9.

⁷⁹ *Id.* at 9, 15.

The proposed new consumer financial protection agency, as described by these authors, is based on the following set of presumptions concerning consumer behavior, markets, and regulation:

- “[m]any consumers are uninformed and irrational,”⁸⁰
- “consumers make systematic mistakes in their choice of credit products and in the use of these products,”⁸¹ and,
- regulations should adopt a number of “behaviorally informed” policies designed to address the consequences of consumer ignorance and irrationality.⁸²

This view of consumers, and the policy recommendations that follow, are in turn based on the “behavioral law and economics” literature.⁸³ This literature consists of a number of studies in economics and psychology that find that consumers appear to make various systematic mistakes evaluating probabilities and discounting future values, and, further, that consumers make various choices that appear inconsistent with each other.

Members of the behavioral law and economics school typically believe that these studies provide a basis for government interventions in the market to prevent consumers from harming themselves. Some members advocate “soft paternalism” that ‘nudges’ consumers towards what certain scholars deem to be better choices.⁸⁴ Such ‘nudges’ often take the form of default rules which map onto the policy preferences of the academic advocate. Professors Cass Sunstein and Richard Thaler, for example, have advocated that businesses make 401-(k) plans “opt out” to nudge consumers to invest in these plans and thereby overcome what Sunstein and Thaler perceive as a tendency to irrationally overemphasize current consumption over long-term saving. Other behavioral law and economics scholars advocate “hard paternalism” that renders disfavored choices impractical or illegal, even between willing and informed consumers and providers.⁸⁵ “Hard paternalism” includes recently proposed “sin” or “vice” taxes aimed at reducing the consumption of junk food, soda, and cigarettes.⁸⁶

⁸⁰ See Bar-Gill & Warren, *supra* note 74, at 21; Barr et al., *supra* note 77, at 1.

⁸¹ Bar-Gill & Warren, *supra* note 74, at 26.

⁸² See generally Barr et al., *supra* note 77, at 1.

⁸³ For a summary of this literature, see Christine Jolls, *Behavioral Law and Economics*, in *ECONOMIC INSTITUTIONS AND BEHAVIORAL ECONOMICS* (Peter Diamond ed., Princeton University Press 2006); Christine Jolls, Cass R. Sunstein & Richard Thaler, *A Behavioral Approach to Law and Economics*, 50 *STAN. L. REV.* 1471 (1998).

⁸⁴ RICHARD THALER & CASS SUNSTEIN, *NUDGE: IMPROVING DECISIONS ABOUT HEALTH, WEALTH, AND HAPPINESS* (Yale University Press 2008).

⁸⁵ See, e.g., Bar-Gill & Warren, *supra* note 74, at 21; Eyal Zamir, *The Efficiency of Paternalism*, 84 *VA. L. REV.* 229, 230-32 (1998); Orly Lobel & On Amir, *Stumble, Predict, Nudge: How Behavioral Economics Informs Law and Policy* (reviewing Thaler & Sunstein, *supra* note 89); Jonathan Gruber, *Smoking’s ‘Internalities,’* 25 *REGULATION* 52 (Winter 2002-2003).

⁸⁶ See Gruber, *supra* note 85.

Behavioral law and economics scholars favoring both “soft” and “hard” forms of paternalism usually take a dim view of consumer borrowing. They believe that consumers systematically over-value current consumption and do not adequately account for the costs of repayment in the future.⁸⁷ Some members of this school therefore advocate a variety of prohibitions on consumer lending, including banning subprime mortgages;⁸⁸ prohibiting credit cards;⁸⁹ requiring the unbundling of transacting and financing services offered by credit card companies so that consumers could not use the same card to make a purchase and then finance it;⁹⁰ and applying state usury laws to credit cards.⁹¹

Economists generally agree that consumers do not carry out the perfectly rational computations that theoretical models usually assume. However, there is considerable controversy over whether many of the findings relied on by behavioral law and economics scholars are sufficiently reliable for the purpose of fashioning policy recommendations. Many of the studies that have been done are based on laboratory experiments in which students or other test subjects are asked to complete some hypothetical exercise. Economists have found that some of these findings are simply the artifact of how questions are posed to the test subjects⁹² while others have argued that the authors of these studies have not adequately explored whether there is a rational explanation for their findings.⁹³ As Professor David Levine of the California Institute of Technology has observed, “While behavioral economics points to many paradoxes and problems with

⁸⁷ See Bar-Gill, *supra* note 75, at 1395-1404.

⁸⁸ See generally Alan M. White, *The Case for Banning Subprime Mortgages*, 77 U. CIN. L. REV. 617 (2008) (expounding upon banning several “subprime” lending practices because, amongst other grounds, consumers systematically over-value present-day consumption to future detriment).

⁸⁹ See, e.g., George Loewenstein & Ted O’Donoghue, *We Can Do This the Easy Way or the Hard Way: Negative Emotions, Self-Regulation, and the Law*, 73 U. CHI. L. REV. 183, 204 (2006) (advocating a ban on credit cards).

⁹⁰ See Bar-Gill, *supra* note 75, at 1425-26.

⁹¹ *Id.* at 1426-28.

⁹² Charles R. Plott & Kathryn Zeiler, *The Willingness to Pay-Willingness to Accept Gap, the “Endowment Effect,” Subject Misconceptions and Experimental Procedures for Eliciting Valuations*, 95 AMERICAN ECONOMIC REVIEW 530 (2005) (“The primary conclusion derived from the data reported here is that observed WTP-WTA gaps do not reflect a fundamental feature of human preferences. That is, endowment effect theory does not seem to explain observed gaps. In addition, our results suggest that observed gaps should not be interpreted as support for prospect theory”).

⁹³ David Levine, *Is Behavioral Economics Doomed: The Ordinary Versus the Extraordinary*, Max Weber Lecture (June 8, 2009), available at <http://www.dklevine.com/papers/behavioral-doomed.pdf>. See also John List, *Neoclassical Theory Versus Prospect Theory: Evidence from the Marketplace*, 72 ECONOMETRICA 615 (2004) (arguing that laboratory results are not robust to market interactions where competition, expertise, and learning might be expected to ameliorate these biases); John A. List, *Does Market Experience Eliminate Market Anomalies?*, 118 Q. J. ECON. 41 (2003) (arguing the same); Michael S. Haigh & John A. List, *Do Professional Traders Exhibit Myopic Loss Aversion? An Experimental Analysis*, 60 J. FIN. 523 (2005) (arguing the same); John A. List & Uri Gneezy, *Putting Behavioral Economics to Work: Testing for Gift Exchange in Labor Markets Using Field Experiments* (Nat’l Bureau of Econ. Research, Working Paper, 2006) (arguing the same); Plott & Zeiler, *supra* note 92, at 1 (finding that the existence and magnitude of the “endowment effect” to be a function of experimental procedures and subject misconception rather than individual preferences); Elizabeth Hoffman, Kevin McCabe, Keith Shachat & Vernon Smith, *Preferences, Property Rights, and Anonymity in Bargaining Games*, 7 GAMES AND ECONOMIC BEHAVIOR, 346 (1994) (arguing that experimental results themselves are the product of experimental procedures and subject misconception rather than individual preferences).

mainstream economics, their own models and claims are often not subject to a great deal of scrutiny.”⁹⁴

Although we believe that regulators and policymakers should be aware of some of the new behavioral studies, and may find useful insights from them, there is hardly a consensus among economists that these studies or their findings are sufficiently robust, or accepted, to provide the basis for regulators to substitute their judgments for consumers.⁹⁵ Unfortunately, many of the behavioral law and economics scholars, including the developers of the CFPB, have leapt from a limited and controversial set of academic studies to radical proposals in which the government substitutes consumer decisions with its own. As Professor Jeffrey Rachlinski of Cornell University School of Law notes, “virtually every scholar who has written on the application of psychological research on judgment and choice to law has concluded that cognitive psychology supports institutional constraint on individual choice.”⁹⁶

In concluding that regulators can (and would) make better choices than consumers, behavioral law and economics proponents tend to forget that regulators are human too and subject to some of the same “cognitive biases” as regular people.⁹⁷ Judge Richard Posner, among other critics, has argued that regulators are just as likely to suffer from cognitive biases as consumers and regulatory ‘nudges’ therefore have significant potential to do more harm than good.⁹⁸ Regulators are, moreover, typically insulated from the incentives to mitigate these errors through education or other means that private actors face in competitive markets.

The CFPB is therefore predicated on the view that consumers frequently make irrational decisions especially when it comes to financial products and that the government would make better decisions for consumers and should establish a “supernanny” to protect consumers from themselves. These advocates have not made an adequate case for this radical approach to government intervention in the market.

There is a further concern. The legal scholars who have proposed and designed the CFPB follow in the tradition of the 19th century moralists who believed that credit was the

⁹⁴ See Levine, *supra* note 93, at 10.

⁹⁵ *Id.*

⁹⁶ Jeffrey J. Rachlinski, *The Uncertain Psychological Case for Paternalism*, 97 NW. U. L. REV. 1165 (2003).

⁹⁷ Most of the experimental evidence that shows “irrational” behavior has been conducted with college and graduate students and is perhaps more representative of the college-educated people who work at regulatory agencies than the average American who borrows money.

⁹⁸ Richard Posner, *Treating Financial Consumers as Consenting Adults*, WALL ST. J., July 22, 2009, available at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203946904574302213213148166.html>.

“great tempter.”⁹⁹ These scholars appear to believe that borrowing money imposes great costs on consumers without providing concomitant benefits. They would therefore favor regulations that sharply constrain the ability of consumers to borrow money. They also share the hubris of the 19th century moralists in thinking that they know better than consumers what is good for them. Irving Bacheller’s 1912 screed, *Charge It!*, expounded this philosophy in no uncertain terms. Railing against the “evils of credit” Bacheller argued against one of the financial innovations of the early 20th century—the personal checkbook—which he insisted would tempt consumers to spend too much money.¹⁰⁰

V. Effect of the CFPA Act on Access to Consumer Credit and Economic Performance

The CFPA Act of 2009 would likely inflict significant collateral damage on consumers, small businesses and the economy. It would:

- reverse the long-term trend towards the democratization of credit that has especially helped socially and economically disadvantaged individuals;
- reduce the number of jobs created in the economy by making it harder for the new firms that create most jobs to access critical consumer credit; and,
- slow economic growth through reduced consumer spending and job creation.

Under plausible yet conservative assumptions the CFPA could:

- increase the interest rates consumers pay by 160 basis points;
- reduce consumer borrowing by at least 2.1 percent; and,
- reduce the net new jobs created in the economy by 4.3 percent.

These impacts would lead to a significant long-term drag on economic performance and slow economic recovery.

This section explains the basis for these conclusions. Our analysis proceeds in four steps. Part A provides an overview of the major provisions of the CFPA Act. It shows that the Act would lead to a radical change in consumer protection law in addition to creating a highly intrusive agency that would likely impose significant costs on lenders. Part B examines the impact of the provisions of the CFPA on the cost of providing credit and the availability of new and existing lending products. It finds that a combination of an

⁹⁹ BACHELLER, *supra* note 21, at 116 (Harper & Brothers 1912).

¹⁰⁰ *Id.*

increase in litigation exposure and increased regulatory compliance costs and risks would likely increase the cost of providing credit products, particularly new ones. It could also result in credit products being withdrawn from the market altogether while deterring the introduction of innovative products. Part C shows that under plausible assumptions the increase in costs and restriction in innovative products resulting from the CFPA could lead to a significant increase in the cost of credit, reduction in credit availability, and loss of jobs. Part D explores the implications of a CFPA-induced credit crunch on the overall economy.

A. Overview of the CFPA Act

There are two broad aspects of the CFPA Act that will affect the lending market. First, the CFPA Act would radically change existing laws on consumer financial protection. Second, the CFPA Act would create a new agency that would have the power to become directly and significantly involved in determining whether, how, and on what terms covered businesses would be able to provide credit to consumers.

1. Legal Changes

The CFPA Act would limit the federal preemption of consumer protection regulation of nationally chartered financial institutions.¹⁰¹ It specifically allows states and municipalities to adopt more stringent regulations than those adopted by the CFPA.¹⁰² Rather than providing a uniform set of regulations governing financial consumer protection, the CFPA effectively provides a “floor” on regulation, exposing banks to further substantial costs.¹⁰³ The Treasury Department’s *Financial Regulatory Reform* plan seems to suggest even further that the CFPA would actively encourage state and local enforcement actions.¹⁰⁴ Consumer protection requirements for lending products could therefore vary across states and possibly municipalities.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, historically the FTC has imposed important restraints on the judicial interpretation of state consumer protection

¹⁰¹ CFPA Act, *supra* note 1, at § 1041(a)(1).

¹⁰² *Id.* at § 1041(b).

¹⁰³ *Id.* The CFPA Act further goes on to provide for consultation between the proposed Agency and state Attorneys General for potential simultaneous suits under the CFPA Act and more stringent state law. *Id.* at § 1042(b).

¹⁰⁴ New Foundation, *supra* note 1, at 50-51.

¹⁰⁵ CFPA Act, *supra* note 1, at § 1041(b).

legislation, encouraging uniformity among states and consistency with the federal consumer protection regulation as well as reducing the possibility of interpretations that are not in consumers' best interests. The CFPB Act would limit those constraints and thereby permit a greater degree of variety and inconsistency.¹⁰⁶

The CFPB Act would also *change* consumer protection laws as applied to financial products. The new agency is authorized to take action to “prevent a person from committing or engaging in an unfair, deceptive, or abusive act or practice under Federal law in connection with any transaction with a consumer for a consumer financial product or service.”¹⁰⁷ The new agency is not required to define which practices are “unfair” or “deceptive” in a manner that comports with longstanding and ever developing jurisprudence guided by the Federal Trade Commission under Section 5 of the FTC Act.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, the term “abusive” is new to the federal and state consumer protection landscape and thus, the CFPB Act of 2009 creates a new legal theory under which lending practices can be found unlawful if deemed “abusive” to consumers.¹⁰⁹ Further, while the CFPB’s ability to declare a practice “unfair” requires at least a superficial analysis of its costs and benefits, no such requirement exists with respect to its powers to identify and impose sanctions against practices it deems “abusive.”¹¹⁰ The CFPB Act also provides for a new “reasonableness” standard under which lenders could be found in violation if they have not provided “reasonable” disclosures to consumers.¹¹¹

The combination of creating a floor for state and municipal regulation, adding the abusive practices and reasonableness standard, and reopening the interpretation of unfair and deceptive practices is a toxic brew. It would likely subject lenders to regulations that vary across geographic lines and uncertainty over how diverse federal, state and municipal regulators and ultimately the courts will define unfair, deceptive, abusive, and reasonable practices. We return to the cost implications of these legal changes below.

¹⁰⁶ See Henry Butler & Jason Johnson, *Consumer Harm Acts? An Economic Analysis of State Consumer Protection Acts* (Northwestern Law & Economics Research Working Paper, No. 08-02, April 24, 2008), available at <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1125305>.

¹⁰⁷ CFPB Act, *supra* note 1, at § 1031.

¹⁰⁸ *Id.* at § 1031(c). Specifically, the proposed Agency merely need “consider established public policies as evidence to be considered with all other evidence” in concluding whether or not a given business practice is “unfair” under the CFPB Act. *Id.* At least one Federal Trade Commissioner has expressed concerns about this feature of the CFPB Act. See William E. Kovacic, Commissioner, Federal Trade Commission, Statement on the Proposal to Create a Consumer Financial Protection Agency to the Committee on Energy and Commerce and the Committee on Financial Services (July 28, 2009), available at <http://www.ftc.gov/speeches/kovacic/090728stmtrecord.pdf>. Commissioner Kovacic notes that “conflicts in interpretation and in litigation strategies, along with an increase in litigation over jurisdictional questions, will adversely affect every core area of consumer protection for which the FTC will continue to exercise primary responsibility.”

¹⁰⁹ CFPB Act, *supra* note 1, at § 1031.

¹¹⁰ *Id.* at § 1031(c).

¹¹¹ *Id.* at §§ 1041(a)(1)-(a)(2).

2. The New Agency

As discussed above the CFPA would have the ability to impose administrative fines and other sanctions based on its interpretation of what constitutes “unfair, deceptive or abusive” practices and whether lenders have acted reasonably. Within this legal framework, the proposed CFPA would have far reaching authority to ban consumer lending products, to require lenders to offer products designed by the CFPA, and to require extensive disclosure.

Banning products. The CFPA would have the authority to restrict or ban consumer lending products.¹¹² Given the express disapproval of the proponents of the CFPA of widely used lending products such as subprime mortgages and credit cards, the CFPA would likely use its authority to prevent consumers from obtaining access to products that the consumers want but that the CFPA subjectively believes are bad for them. Professor Barr and his co-authors, for example, have suggested that the government should “specify terms and conditions that are ‘safe’ and qualify for being offered as a standard credit card.” At the same time, they argue for restricting consumer access to credit cards that do not meet the government-imposed requirements and for “increased liability risk if the disclosure is found to have been unreasonable” after the fact.¹¹³

Mandated provision of “plain vanilla products”. Under the Administration’s plan the CFPA could consider requiring the lender to make another product of the CFPA’s design also available to the consumer at the same time.¹¹⁴ It could insist that consumers explicitly reject the “plain vanilla” product before the lender could offer its own product.¹¹⁵

Regulatory review of new products. The CFPA could subject new products to an extensive review process including one in which the CFPA must approve mandatory disclosure language for the product.¹¹⁶ The CFPA could also require firms to provide detailed information on consumer choices, including “warnings to consumers about the heightened risks” of using alternative products not pre-approved by the CFPA.¹¹⁷

¹¹² *Id.* at §§ 1031, 1037.

¹¹³ Barr et al., *supra* note 77, at 15.

¹¹⁴ CFPA Act, *supra* note 1, at § 1036(b)(1).

¹¹⁵ *Id.* at §§ 1036(b)(1)(B); 1036(b)(2).

¹¹⁶ *Id.* at §§ 1032(a); 1034(a), (b).

¹¹⁷ *Id.* at § 1036(b)(1)(A).

B. Effect of the CFPA Act on the Cost of Providing Credit and the Availability of Consumer Lending Products

1. Impact of Costs

These provisions of the CFPA would likely raise the cost of providing credit significantly.

We begin with the legal changes. To begin with it is important to recognize that any new regulation, no matter how simple or well intended, can result in a mass of conflicting interpretations, and litigation, that raise the cost and uncertainty for covered businesses. The Truth in Lending Act provides a good example.¹¹⁸ A week before the law became effective in 1969 there were 34 official interpretations of the regulation. Ten years later federal courts were inundated with more than 13,000 Truth-in-Lending lawsuits. By early 1980, the Federal Reserve Board had published more than 1500 interpretations attempting to provide some clarity to minimize the uncertainty created by the varying decisions made by the courts. Today, compliance with the Truth in Lending law requires a great deal of resources. The CFPA Act is likely to lead to a bureaucratic and legal mess far greater than the Truth-in-Lending Law generated. That is because the CFPA Act is a much more expansive and far-reaching piece of legislation and, most importantly, unlike the Truth in Lending Law the CFPA Act provides for the states and municipalities to have their own laws and regulations which will also require interpretation.

The CFPA Act would also result in financial institutions facing significant legal costs for lawsuits emanating from states and localities. To begin with the states could sue lenders under Section 1031 of the CFPA Act which prohibits “unfair,” “deceptive,” or “abusive” lending practices.¹¹⁹ Other industries that have been exposed to state litigation have incurred significant costs as a result, which they have had to pass on to consumers.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ See Thomas A. Durkin, *The Impact of the Consumer Financial Protection Agency Act on Small Business*, US CHAMBER OF COMMERCE MAGAZINE, September 23, 2009, available at http://www.uschambermagazine.com/publications/reports/090923_cfp_sb.htm (last visited Sep. 26, 2009).

¹¹⁹ CFPA Act, *supra* note 1, at § 1031.

¹²⁰ See Professor Michael J. Saks' letter to Sen. Ernest Hollings, S. 687. The Product Liability Fairness Act: Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Consumer of the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, United State Senate, One Hundred Third Congress, first session, September 23, 1993, 126. Even though the average price effect of liability costs may be small across industries, in some sectors it can be quite large. See Tomas J. Philipson & Eric Sun, *Is the Food and Drug Administration Safe and Effective?*, 22 J. ECON. PERSP. 85, 94–95 (2008) (suggesting that the deadweight losses to consumers and producers from the price increase due to product liability litigation in the pharmaceutical industry is in the tens of billions of dollars); Paul Rubin & Joanna Shepherd, *Tort Reform and Accidental Deaths*, 50 J.L. & ECON. 221 (2007) (estimating that product liability has increased accidental deaths by raising the prices of safety-enhancing goods and services); Richard L. Manning, *Changing Rules in Tort Law and the Market for Childhood Vaccines*, 37 J. L. & ECON. 247, 273 (1994) (suggesting that the price of vaccines went up twenty-fold after product liability imposed);

Consumers of pharmaceutical products have incurred costs in the tens of billions of dollars as a result of state product liability litigation according to one study.¹²¹

Lenders would also face considerable uncertainty which imposes significant costs. They would not know for some years how the courts will ultimately define unfair, deceptive, and abusive practices and what constitutes a reasonable disclosure of information. During this period, lenders would have difficulty assessing what they are required to do under the new law or what their financial exposure would be for failing to meet legal requirements across diverse geographic lines. In addition, the exposure to state and local litigation poses the possibility that financial institutions will face penalties that could lead to bankruptcy or severe losses. Businesses, of course, must be compensated for bearing risk and uncertainty.

As noted above, the CFPA Act simultaneously opens consumer financial protection to diverse and inconsistent state and local regulation, allows regulators to adopt new interpretations of traditional consumer protection terms such as unfair and deceptive practices, and adds new concepts of abuse and reasonableness which are undefined in the consumer credit context. These three features have a multiplier effect and would likely result in an exponential increase in the cost and uncertainty of complying with consumer financial protection laws and regulations.

In addition to the changes in the legal landscape the new agency created by the CFPA Act would likely impose other significant costs on consumer lending products and providers of those products. Each loan would require additional paper work and other compliance costs. This increase in paperwork is not merely speculative. According to the Act, “The Agency may on a periodic basis . . . require reports from a covered person for purposes of ensuring compliance with the requirements of this title, the enumerated consumer protection laws, and any rules prescribed by the Agency . . .”¹²² Granting the proposed Agency broad powers to create rules, this provision alone allows for potentially unlimited reporting on an as-of-yet undefined amount of as-of-yet unwritten administrative regulations.

The intensive review process envisioned by the CFPA Act¹²³ would be particularly expensive for new products. Firms introducing new products often make numerous subsequent adjustments in their design in response to feedback from consumers and as

¹²¹ See Philipson & Sun, *supra* note 121.

¹²² CFPA Act, *supra* note 1, at § 1022(c)(1).

¹²³ *Id.* at § 1036(b)(1).

they learn about the performance of those products and consumer preferences. Providers of new consumer financial products would have to submit these products to the CFPA's review process before they have gotten any market feedback and before in effect these products were "fully baked." Normal changes in product design following the introduction of the lending product could expose the firm to administrative or enforcement actions unless submitted to the CFPA beforehand for further review and approval, delaying the ability to offer consumers improved products. The lack of consumer experience is also a problem for the agency which would be making judgments on disclosure and other issues with at best limited information from consumers. As Federal Trade Commissioner Thomas J. Rosch has noted, "there is no evidence that this proposed new agency has any core competency in protecting consumers in the financial marketplace."¹²⁴ Therefore it is likely that the CFPA's "plain vanilla" requirements would induce consumers to take products that would be poorer choices than the consumers would have picked on their own.¹²⁵ The CFPA would therefore likely impose a significant increase in the costs and risks of introducing new products.

The plain vanilla requirement is likely to impose even further costs and risks on lenders. Consider a lender that introduces a new lending product. The lender determines whether the introduction of that product will generate enough profit to justify its investment in the product along with its exposure to litigation and regulatory costs. Suppose it decides before considering the effect of the plain vanilla requirement that it would be profitable to make the product available to consumers. Now it must factor in the CFPA's decisions on a plain vanilla product. Some, and perhaps many, consumers may decide to take the plain vanilla version. That version may be less profitable than the version designed by the lender. As a result the new product may not yield an adequate return once the profits from both the product designed by the lender and the plain vanilla product designed by the CFPA are taken into account. Alternatively, the lender may have to raise fees on the plain vanilla and its own product to cover revenue losses associated with the diversion of customers from its own product to the plain vanilla product. Finally,

¹²⁴ J. Thomas Rosch, Commissioner, Federal Trade Commission, Statement on the Proposal to Create a Consumer Financial Protection Agency Before the Committee on Financial Services (July 21, 2009), *available at* <http://www.ftc.gov/speeches/rosch/090721roschstatement.pdf>.

¹²⁵ The CFPA Act requires the new agency to subject its rules and regulations to a cost-benefit test. Other federal agencies have the same requirement yet there is little evidence that it is taken seriously. *See generally* Robert W. Hahn & Cass R. Sunstein, *A New Executive Order for Improving Federal Regulation? Deeper and Wider Cost-Benefit Analysis*, 150 U. PA. L. REV., 1489 (2002), Moreover, the proponents of the agency tend to see few benefits in consumer borrowing and many costs which suggest that the new agency, if it adopted a similar view, would find that restrictions on consumer credit availability pass a cost-benefit test.

in any event, the lender would need to factor in the risks associated with the CFPA's decisions on how to design a plain vanilla product when making decisions on investment in a new lending product. To compensate for that added risk the lender would have to increase the interest rates and fees for new products that it introduces.

Overall, the CFPA would likely increase the costs of supplying credit to consumers. The variable cost of lending would increase as a result of the paperwork requirements and as a result of the increased litigation exposure that each loan presents. That would directly result in an increase in the interest rates and other fees associated with extending a loan. In addition, the CFPA would increase the fixed costs of making a particular lending product available to consumers. New products in particular would face a lengthy and involved review process, require the development of disclosures that meet the agency's reasonableness requirement and could satisfy its unfair, deceptive and abusive practices requirements. Lenders offering new and innovative products could also face financial exposure from litigation over the provision of that product. As a result lenders would have to raise the interest rates and fees on products to cover these costs or alternatively not make those products available at all.

2. Impact on the Availability of Consumer Lending Products

We have just seen that the CFPA Act would likely increase the prices that consumers pay for credit products. Consumers are actually harmed in two ways. First, higher prices curtail the amount of credit available to consumers, who will be worse off because they no longer get to enjoy the benefits of that credit. For the credit that they would still obtain, consumers would pay higher prices and have less money to spend on other things. As we explain in the next section, these marginal changes in prices and consumption are likely to be very costly.

The second and more serious concern with the CFPA is that it would prevent consumers from obtaining certain credit products at all. Consumers would lose the entire benefit they were previously obtaining from those products. In some cases consumers may have no other lending product to turn to and would be liquidity constrained. There are two reasons to believe that the CFPA Act would in fact completely cut off consumer access to certain credit products and possibly to credit altogether. The first follows directly from the preceding discussion: lenders would not make some lending products,

particularly new ones, available because they would not be profitable given the costs and the risks they face under the CFPA regulatory regime. We focus on the second one here: the CFPA itself is likely to directly prevent consumers from obtaining lending products that they would like to use.

The CFPA would have the authority to ban or restrict certain lending products.¹²⁶ Of course, the likelihood that the new agency would ban various consumer lending products that consumers would use if they were available does not by itself mean that consumers would be harmed. The well-meaning scholars who have designed the CFPA believe that they have provided theoretical and empirical evidence that demonstrates that various lending products, or significant variants of these products, harm consumers. They believe that many consumers use these products because they are misinformed and irrational. Their view is misguided for at least two reasons.

First, as we described in Section II, consumers borrow money for sound and rational reasons. They can improve their level of well-being by borrowing against future incomes so that their enjoyment of life is not bunched up in middle age. They also benefit from borrowing for many other reasons such as a temporary short-fall of income, sudden expenses, wanting to start a business, or wanting to make an investment in a home. In short, the fact that consumer behavior does not conform to paternalist advocates' subjective valuation of future time or income does not *ipso facto* render consumer choices irrational or welfare-reducing. Indeed, the burden is on those who would deny consumer's own evaluation of their welfare to prove that consumers are wrong and that the CFPA would consistently make better judgments.

Second, consumers are necessarily in a better position than regulators to decide on what products are best for them in their particular circumstances. Individuals know their own preferences such as their tradeoffs between risk and certainty and between consumption and debt. Consumers also have more knowledge of their own aspirations, needs, future incomes, and other life plans than regulators could ever have. It is doubtful that regulators could better assess what consumer lending products should be offered to consumers than would lenders who have a direct competitive interest in satisfying consumers' needs and tastes.

Professors Bar-Gill and Warren argue that regulators should prevent the sale of harmful consumer lending products just as they prevent the sale of exploding toasters.

¹²⁶ CFPA Act, *supra* note 1, at §§ 1036(b)(1), 1039.

The analogy is inapt and, more importantly, does not reflect the type of consumer lending regulation that these designers of the CFPA have in mind. Consumers do *not* want to buy toasters that have a significant risk of explosion and they can benefit from government regulations that require manufacturers to make toasters safe. Consumers *do* want to borrow money even though there is a risk that they will have trouble paying it back or that the house they bought does not appreciate as much as they had hoped. Consumers knowingly choose to take these risks all the time. The advocates of the CFPA are not seeking to prevent lenders from offering consumers the credit equivalent of an exploding toaster. Rather, the CFPA’s advocates believe that consumers should be restrained from choosing products and services that significant numbers of consumers have willingly used safely and to their advantage. The CFPA’s advocates would have consumers “nudged” into using only those particular products that the regulators have approved for them. This approach to regulation would be like having the Consumer Product Safety Commission prohibit the sale of particular toasters that they believe consumers do not really need, or requiring toaster manufacturers to offer consumers a “plain vanilla” toaster in addition to, and even in preference to, their feature-laden models.

We showed earlier that financial innovation expanded the supply and accessibility of consumer credit enormously between the start of the 1980s and the onset of the current financial crisis. During that period of time innovations in risk analysis and securitization, combined with the introduction of many new credit products, enabled millions of Americans to borrow, many of whom had limited, more expensive, or no previous access to credit. Millions were able to buy homes—which, for the vast majority, were good investments. They were also able to borrow against future income to buy many common consumer durables—everything from automobiles to refrigerators to televisions—that households buy especially when they are younger. The financial innovations helped American consumers weather some stormy economic times including the period of high interest rates and inflation uncertainty in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the stock market crash of 1987, and the collapse of the dot.com bubble and the uncertainty following 9/11. Innovative consumer lending products also helped accommodate a massive increase in household formation as a result of the baby boom generation—and their children—entering the workforce.

These financial innovations also relieved the liquidity constraints that prevented many socially and economically disadvantaged Americans from gaining access to credit at

all or that had forced them to turn to very high cost alternatives. More minorities, single parents, and low-income households were able to get mortgages, credit cards, and other lending products that markedly improved their lives. Financial institutions were able to lend money to more high-risk households because these institutions had tools that enabled them to better assess and manage the risks and because these lenders could diversify their risks through securitization and other risk management tools.

Based on our analysis of the CFPA Act of 2009, and how its proponents envisaged the CFPA to regulate consumer financial products, we believe that the most likely scenario is that, if enacted, the CFPA Act would reverse the increase in the availability and democratization of credit that consumers have benefited from over the last thirty years. The CFPA Act would result in a credit crunch for many Americans who would either not have access to credit or have to turn to inferior sources such as payday lending.

C. The Estimated Effects of the CFPA on Economic Welfare

The CFPA will impose a significant cost shock to lenders. It is possible to get a rough idea of how this cost increase could affect the supply of credit from other recent regulatory cost shocks affecting the cost of lending. For example, Rice and Strahan examine the impact of a change in regulatory costs on the interest rates paid by small firms.¹²⁷ The 1994 Interstate Banking and Branching Efficiency Act (IBBEA) allowed bank and bank holding companies to expand across state lines; prior to its passage there had been virtually no interstate branches. The IBBEA, however, preserved states' rights to impose various costs on the expansion of out-of-state banks in their states and some states did so. Rice and Strahan estimate the effect of these state-imposed restrictions on the interest rates paid on bank loans by small businesses by comparing bank lending in states that imposed restrictions with those that did not. These authors find that the interest rates paid by small businesses were 80 to 100 basis points higher in states with the most restrictive rules on bank expansion compared with the states with the least restrictive rules.

We take this 80 basis point regulatory penalty as a lower bound on the effect of that the CFPA Act would have on interest rates. The regulatory restrictions imposed by the states following the IBBEA were relatively modest and require little in the way of judicial interpretation. They included setting a minimum age of the target institution,

¹²⁷ Tara Rice & Philip E. Strahan, *Does Credit Competition Affect Small Firm Finance?* (forthcoming 2009), available at http://www2.bc.edu/~strahan/CreditCompetition_June2009.pdf.

restrictions on acquiring individual branches, imposing a statewide deposit cap, and preventing in some cases setting up a new branch. By contrast the scope of the CFPA Act is enormous. It would create a highly intrusive federal regulatory agency, require lenders to comply with differing regulations across 50 states and their municipalities, create a costly product review process, and expose lenders to litigation under untested laws by federal, state and municipal enforcers. There is also an enormous difference in the degree of uncertainty that banks would face. The restrictions that banks faced in some states following the IBBEA were clear and known with certainty; there was a precise age requirement or deposit cap imposed by a state. These restrictions did not impose significant costs on banks deriving from uncertainty with regard to how the restrictions would be interpreted and change over time. The CFPA Act, on the other hand, creates considerable uncertainty because many of the federal and state rules concerning what lenders can and cannot do are vague and ambiguous, and because the application of the unfair, deceptive, abusive, and unreasonableness standards by the regulators and courts will remain highly uncertain for many years.

It is therefore plausible that the CFPA would impose a multiple of the costs on lenders than what the states imposed through geographic branching restrictions following the passage of the IBBEA. We report estimates based on the CFPA Act having the same, twice, and three times the impact on interest rates as the state-imposed geographic branch restrictions studied by Rice and Strahan. Those estimates imply that the CFPA Act would increase interest rates by 80 basis points if the impact of the CFPA Act's regulations was the same as the geographic restrictions, 160 basis points if the impact of those regulations was twice as costly and 320 basis points if it was three times as costly. We take 160 basis points as the likely lower bound on the effect of the CFPA Act on interest rates.

Consumers would not just pay more for credit. In response to the increased prices they would use less credit with resulting impacts on consumer spending. Financial economists have also used changes in nominal credit card interest rates to estimate a long-run debt elasticity in consumer credit markets of -1.3.¹²⁸ That is, a 1 percent (a 100 basis point) increase in the cost of debt would reduce the amount of long-run debt acquired by 1.3 percent. Combining these estimates, we can generate a rough prediction of the impact of the CFPA on interest rates and credit supply assuming that the regulatory costs would

¹²⁸ David Gross & Nicholas Souleles, *Consumer Response to Changes in Credit Supply: Evidence from Credit Card Data* (Wharton Business School, Working Paper, Feb. 4, 2000), available at <http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/papers/1161.pdf>. These estimates are based on credit cards and could be different for other debt products.

generate interest rate effects that are equal to, twice as bad, and three times as bad as the state restrictions on interstate banking. An 80 basis point increase would result in a 1.0 percent reduction in amount of long-term debt, a 160 basis point increase would result 2.1 percent reduction in the amount of long-term debt, and a 320 basis point increase would result in a 4.2 percent reduction in the amount of long-term debt. These estimates should be interpreted as lower bounds on consumer responsiveness to changes in interest rates since they are calculated with data from the 1990s and, at the current dramatically reduced levels of consumer credit available after the financial crisis, more consumers are liquidity constrained and thus more sensitive to interest rate changes. We take 2.1 percent as the likely lower bound on the reduction in credit borrowing for these reasons but also because the CFPB Act may also ban certain lending products that are the only way for some consumers to borrow.

The reduction in credit availability would be likely to generate significant losses for consumers. The economic literature provides some estimates of the effects of regulatory restrictions on access to credit products likely to fall under the CFPB's scope. For example, Morse finds that restrictions on financial products can exacerbate the negative impact of disasters, including 1.2 more foreclosures per 1,000 homes and 2.67 more larcenies per 1,000 homes.¹²⁹ This analysis suggests that the harmful consequences of restrictions on lending products will be felt not only by consumers facing personal emergencies, but also by communities that are left less able to rebound quickly from community shocks. Federal Reserve economists Morgan and Strain reach similar results, finding that restrictions on consumer financial products in Georgia and North Carolina resulted in more bounced checks, more complaints about lenders and debt collectors filed with the Federal Trade Commission, and more bankruptcies.¹³⁰ Similarly, Karlan and Zinman find that access to consumer financial products can significantly improve household outcomes ranging from job retention to staving off hunger.¹³¹

The CFPB credit squeeze is likely to negatively impact small businesses and job creation.¹³² Small businesses can have a difficult time obtaining credit because they present lenders with significant adverse selection, moral hazard, and asymmetric

¹²⁹ Adair Morse, *Payday Lenders: Heroes or Villains?* (Booth School of Business, Working Paper, January 2009).

¹³⁰ Donald P. Morgan & Michael R. Strain, *Payday Holiday: How Households Fare after Payday Credit Bans* 4-5 (Federal Reserve Bank of New York, Working Paper, Feb. 2008). See also, Johnathan Zinman, *Restricting Consumer Credit Access: Household Survey Evidence on Effects Around the Oregon Rate Cap* 2-5 (Dartmouth College, August 2009).

¹³¹ Dean Karlan & Johnathan Zinman, *Expanding Credit Access: Using Randomized Supply Decisions to Estimate the Impacts* (Innovations for Poverty Action, Working Paper, January 2008).

¹³² Durkin, *supra* note 118, at 1.

information problems and because they have high failure rates. Indeed, one estimate suggests that approximately 20% of firms with fewer than 20 employees did not bother to apply for credit because they assumed they would be denied.

Small businesses rely extensively on consumer financial products. These include home equity loans, personal loans, auto title loans and credit cards.¹³³ Indeed, almost half of firms with fewer than 20 employees use a consumer credit card to help finance their businesses.¹³⁴ These small business owners would encounter the same increase in the cost of credit as regular consumers and face the same prospect of not being able to get credit at all. Since small businesses are notoriously fragile these increases in the cost of credit, or denial of credit, could have far reaching effects on the viability of small firms.

As a result of its impact on small firms that rely on consumer credit, the CFPA could have serious effects on job creation. Most net new jobs¹³⁵ in the United States are created by new firms and most of these new firms start out small. These small businesses account for a disproportionate share of new job creation in the United States.¹³⁶ Startup firms with fewer than 20 employees accounted for 86.7% of net job creation in the United States from 1987-2005.¹³⁷ As noted above, about half of these businesses relied on credit cards for financing and others rely on other forms of consumer financing.

We do not believe that it is implausible that the CFPA Act could result in a significant number of aspiring new small business owners not being able to obtain the consumer credit necessary to get their businesses off the ground. An extensive literature in economics demonstrates that entrepreneurs are liquidity constrained and that lack of access to credit deters many from starting new businesses; the flip side of this finding is that a contraction in the supply of credit increases the number of entrepreneurs that are liquidity constrained and thereby reduces the number of start-ups.¹³⁸ Suppose that the increase in credit prices and reductions in the availability of credit results in a 5 percent reduction in the number of aspiring entrepreneurs were not able to start their firms. If we

¹³³ Charles Ou and Victoria Williams, *Lending to Small Businesses by Financial Institutions in the United States*, in SMALL BUSINESSES IN FOCUS: FINANCE, A COMPENDIUM OF RESEARCH BY THE SMALL BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION'S OFFICE OF ADVOCACY (2009).

¹³⁴ *Id.*

¹³⁵ Net new jobs takes into account the fact that new firms both create jobs and, when they fail, destroy jobs.

¹³⁶ John Haltiwanger, Ron Jarmin & Javier Miranda, *Business Formation and Dynamics by Business Age: Results from the New Business Dynamics Statistics*, (Working Paper, May 2008), available at http://econweb.umd.edu/~haltiwanger/bds_paper_CAED_may2008_may20.pdf.

¹³⁷ John Haltiwanger, Ron Jarmin & Javier Miranda, *Business Dynamics Statistics Briefing: Jobs Created From Business Startups in the United States*, (Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, Working Paper, January 2009), available at <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1352538>.

¹³⁸ See David S. Evans & Boyan Jovanovic, *An Estimated Model of Entrepreneurial Choice under Liquidity Constraints*, 97 J. POL. ECON. 808, 808-27 (1989).

focus just on firms with fewer than 20 employees, that could lead to the elimination of roughly 4.3 percent ($.05 \times .867$) of net new jobs.

D. The CFPA Act of 2009 and the Economic Recovery

The timing of the CFPA Act of 2009 could not be worse. Suppose the Act became law by January 1, 2010. It would take many months, and perhaps years, before the agency envisioned by the CFPA would begin functioning. The Administration would have to make a number of appointments, the existing regulatory agencies would have to transfer staff, and the new agency would have to organize itself and hire additional staff to meet its new responsibilities. It would then take further time before the new agency would have the opportunity to interpret its legislative mandate and adopt rules and regulations. It would also take time before the courts had reviewed cases to test these interpretations. The severe limitations on federal preemption would also likely lead states and municipalities—who would not be required to wait for the CFPA to get organized and become fully operational—to adopt new and likely conflicting consumer lending regulations, creating a stilted, heterogeneous set of legal regimes at the state level.

For a substantial period of time financial institutions would face great uncertainty over the likely costs of lending to consumers for the reasons discussed above; whether their financial products would be approved by the new agency; the nature of the plain vanilla products and the effect of these product on the profitability of lending to consumers; and the scope of their institutions' litigation exposure. We would expect financial institutions to address these major new regulatory risks by reducing their lending to consumers in the face of this uncertainty. In consequence of these limitations on business activity, investors would shy away from placing their capital in firms subject to CFPA authority, limiting capital growth if not actually shrinking it.

That reduction in lending would occur almost immediately after the passage of the legislation. It would come at a time when the economy is just beginning a tenuous recovery from the deepest economic downturn in 75 years. A major obstacle to the economic recovery is that lack of access to financing for consumers and businesses. It is well known that many consumers and businesses in today's economic environment have great difficulty obtaining mortgages, educational loans, automobile loans, credit card loans, and other sources of credit. The Federal Reserve reported consumer credit dropped

by historic rates in the last weeks of the summer 2009. It decreased from 2.74 trillion in July 2008 to 2.47 trillion in July 2009.¹³⁹ Small businesses which rely on consumer lending products to finance their operations have been especially hurt.¹⁴⁰ The CFPB Act would deter financial institutions from expanding consumer lending needed for the success of these very businesses.

The ramifications of this reduction in consumer lending in 2010 and 2011 that could occur if the CFPB Act of 2009 were signed into law are quite serious. Consumer spending is vital to the economic recovery. Encouraging sustainable consumer spending requires encouraging policies that induce consumers to buy homes and consumer durable goods again as well as to engage in everyday shopping. As is well known, consumer spending has a multiplier effect, which leads to dramatic economic expansion and the growth in jobs. With an unemployment rate of close to 10 percent and weak consumer spending it would seem particularly counterproductive to have the government put a thumb on credit availability by raising the costs and risks on consumer lending by financial institutions. It is also not the time to further restrict lending to small businesses and dampen the creation of new jobs that are important for pulling the economy to recovery.

VI. Conclusions

The CFPB Act of 2009 is a misguided attempt to erect a supernanny agency that would substitute its own choices for how and under what circumstances consumers should be able to borrow money. The proponents of the CFPB have not provided a basis for adopting sweeping changes in the regulatory structure of consumer financial protection regulation. While improving consumer protection is needed, particularly for the non-bank institutions that virtually all commentators identify as the source of most problem mortgages, it is hard to maintain that the financial crisis would have been avoided by more consumer protection.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ Federal Reserve Statistical Release G19, September 9, 2009, available at <http://www.federalreserve.gov/releases/g19/Current/>.

¹⁴⁰ See, e.g., Joseph A. Mann, Jr., *Lack of Credit Hurts Small Businesses*, MIAMI HERALD, Feb. 25, 2009, available at <http://www.miamiherald.com/business/5min/story/914255.html>.

¹⁴¹ FEDERAL RESERVE BOARD, STAFF ANALYSIS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CRA AND THE SUBPRIME CRISIS, November 21, 2008, available at http://www.federalreserve.gov/newsevents/speech/20081203_analysis.pdf.

Short term the CFPA Act would jeopardize the current economic recovery, and recovery from high unemployment, because the Act would significantly raise the uncertainty over the costs of lending consumers money. It would take several years for the new agency to give lending institutions clear guidance and for the courts to interpret new legal obligations on lenders, suppressing lending activity (and investment in lending firms) in the meanwhile.

Over the longer term, the CFPA Act of 2009 would restrict the supply of consumer credit, reduce consumer choice over how consumers can borrow, and increase the cost of consumer credit. In doing so it would inflict collateral damage on small businesses that often rely on consumer credit products. A significant part of these increased costs would come from opening a flood gate of state regulation and litigation under a new vague legal standard. The CFPA Act would also turn back the clock on successful efforts to democratize credit—that is to make credit widely available so that all segments of American consumers can borrow to meet their short-term and long-term needs. It would further make it harder for the new firms that create most jobs to obtain credit and would thereby lead to a permanent reduction in job creation.