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## Quantifying the Lasting Harm to the US Economy from the Financial Crisis

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The financial crisis and ensuing Great Recession left the US economy in an injured state. In 2013, output was 13% below its trend path from 1990 through 2007. Part of this shortfall—2.2 percentage points out of the 13—was the result of lingering slackness in the labor market in the form of abnormal unemployment and substandard weekly hours of work. The single biggest contributor was a shortfall in business capital, which accounted for 3.9 percentage points. The second largest was a shortfall of 3.5 percentage points in total factor productivity. The fourth was a shortfall of 2.4 percentage points in labor-force participation. I discuss these four sources of the injury in detail, focusing on identifying state variables that may or may not return to earlier growth paths. The conclusion is optimistic about the capital stock and slackness in the labor market and pessimistic about reversing the declines in total factor productivity and the part of the participation shortfall not associated with the weak labor market.

The years since 2007 have been a macroeconomic disaster for the United States of a magnitude unprecedented since the Great Depression. The disaster has spawned a literature in macroeconomics that emphasizes the collapse of product and labor demand and the inability to offset the collapse with conventional monetary expansion because of the zero lower bound. For a discussion along these lines with cites to that literature, see Hall (2013).

Here I take for granted that the financial crisis was the cause of the collapse in product and labor demand and that expansionary policy was unable to offset the collapse. I offer a complementary analysis of other aspects of the postcrisis economy, focusing on the durable effects of the crisis that a boost in product demand would not correct quickly. These effects are:

- lost total factor productivity,
- lost investment resulting in a lower capital stock,
- unemployment and short weekly hours of work lingering after job-creation incentives have returned to normal, and
- a persistent decline in labor-force participation.

Table 1 provides estimates of these and other changes in the economy following the crisis (an appendix and accompanying spreadsheets describe the calculations in detail). For the US business sector, it calculates the shortfall of output from trend after 2007 and breaks the shortfall into components of total factor productivity, capital, and labor, using Solow's growth accounting formula. The trend for each variable is measured from 1990 through 2007. The rows for years show the values of variables as the difference the variable would have contributed to output growth had the variable continued on its precrisis trend, and its actual contribution in each year. For example, output in 2009 grew 7.4% less than its precrisis trend. The bottom panel shows the cumulative shortfall, in percentage points, over the three and six years following end of the year prior to the crisis, 2007. For example, as of 2013, output was 13.3% below trend, the sum of the numbers in the first column of the top panel. The basic data come from John Fernald's calculations of annual total factor productivity (see Fernald 2012). Fernald breaks productivity growth into a component reflecting changes in factor utilization and a residual, but I combine the two into an overall measure of productivity change. He reports labor input as total hours worked. Using additional data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), I have decomposed the total into those arising from changes in population, labor-force participation, the employment rate (one minus the unemployment rate), hours per week, labor quality (from Fernald), and the fraction of total labor input that the business economy employs (as opposed to government and households). I calculate hours per week as a residual, by dividing total hours by the product of the population growth factor, the participation growth factor, and the employment rate growth factor. The change in the resulting measure has a correlation of 0.81 with the change in weekly hours from the Current Population Survey. The sources of this moderate discrepancy is mainly that Fernald uses hours per job and I use hours per worker. These differ because a fraction of workers have two or more jobs.

The shortfall shown in the bottom panel is on a different conceptual basis from the output gap. The gap is usually viewed as the amount

**Table 1**  
Components of the Shortfall of Output Two and Five Years after the Crisis

Year(s)	Shortfall, Percent							
	Output =	Productivity	+ Capital	Labor-Force	Employment	Hours	Labor	Business
			+ Contribution	+ Participation	Rate	+ Per Week	Quality	+ Fraction
2008	4.9	3.0	0.2	0.3	0.8	0.5	-0.3	0.3
2009	7.4	1.7	0.8	0.3	2.4	1.6	-0.4	0.4
2010	0.1	-1.6	1.0	0.3	0.3	-0.5	0.0	0.0
2011	0.5	0.3	0.8	0.4	-0.4	-0.2	0.1	-0.9
2012	-0.1	0.1	0.6	-0.1	-0.6	-0.4	0.0	-0.1
2013	0.5	0.1	0.5	0.3	-0.3	-0.2	0.3	-0.3
2007 through 2010	12.4	3.1	2.1	0.8	3.5	1.6	-0.6	0.7
2007 through 2013	13.3	3.5	3.9	1.3	2.2	0.8	-0.3	-0.5

*Source:* See appendix A and spreadsheets.

that output would rise if frictions and distortions suddenly disappeared. It may also be the amount that expansionary monetary and fiscal policy could raise output. In measuring the output gap, key state variables such as total factor productivity and the capital stock, the variables are taken at their actual current values, not at hypothetical values that would have prevailed if earlier frictions and distortions had not impaired the performance of the economy. My framework uses those hypothetical values. The values are extrapolations of precrisis trends to provide a benchmark for understanding the effects of the crisis. I do not take a stand on the economic cost of the crisis, a concept with meaning only by describing a superior policy that could have avoided some of the effects of the crisis. To even begin to think about the cost, it would be essential to focus on consumption rather than output.

The column headed "Capital Contribution" is the elasticity of the production function with respect to the capital stock (about 0.38) times the log change in the stock. Similarly, the columns relating to the components of labor input report the product of the labor elasticity (about 0.62) times the percentage shortfall in those components.

The sum of the effects in 2008 through 2010 captures the Great Recession. I depart from the NBER's identification of the end of the recession in 2009 because the labor-market indicators continued to decline through 2010. During the three-year period, the shortfall in output cumulated to 12.4%. Shortfalls in output occurred because of higher unemployment and a correspondingly lower employment rate (3.5 percentage points), lower productivity (3.1 percentage points), the reduction in the capital contribution on account of the collapse of investment (2.1 percentage points), declining labor-force participation (1.2 percentage points), and declining weekly hours of work (1.6 percentage points). The only component moving in the opposite direction was rising labor quality, which cut the shortfall by 0.6 percentage points.

By 2013, the picture changed. The total shortfall in output was only slightly larger, at 13.3 percentage points compared to 12.4 two years earlier. The continuing shortfall in plant and equipment investment cumulated to account for 3.9 percentage points, well above its earlier contribution of 2.1 percentage points. The shortfall in labor-force participation grew to 2.4 percentage points. On the other hand, the part of the shortfall associated with unemployment declined, from 3.5 percentage points to 2.2. Hours per week returned to 0.8% below its trend path in 2012. Low utilization of labor, in the form of high unemployment and low hours subsided, while depleted capital and a shift of the population

away from the labor market cut more sharply into output growth. This paper concentrates on four of the larger components in the bottom line of table 1: productivity, capital, unemployment, and participation.

The analysis reaches the following conclusions:

*Productivity.* The postcrisis slowdown in total factor productivity growth may be a result of the crisis, but the evidence is weak. Similar slowdowns over six-year periods have been common. A study of detailed industries does not point toward diminished factor utilization or any other causal mechanism. A boost to product demand seems unlikely to induce a catch-up in productivity.

*Capital stock.* Discount rates applicable to capital formation rose sharply during the crisis and have remained high in the following years, notwithstanding a drop in low-risk interest rates. This force and the other adverse forces unleashed in the crisis lowered output, compounding the adverse effect on investment from the rise in the discount. The result is a capital stock 13.2% below its level had the economy grown along its earlier trend during the postcrisis years and a capital contribution 10.2% below trend (growth in capital's share accounts for the difference). Despite this shortfall, the capital/output ratio was above its trend value in 2013. Only when output begins to grow fast enough to offset the large output shortfall will investment begin to move back to its precrisis trend path. Because the capital stock is a state variable incapable of making jumps, it would be impossible for a boost to product demand to restore the crisis-induced shortfall in capital. As time passes and the adverse effects of the crisis on product demand and discount rates dissipate, capital will return to its precrisis growth path.

*Unemployment.* Job-creation incentives returned to normal soon after the crisis. Hours of work of employed individuals also returned a good part of the way back to normal. These two facts would normally coincide with a return to normal unemployment rates in the range of 5.5 to 6.0%. The unemployment rate in April 2014, at 6.3%, was most of the way back toward its normal range, but the labor market looked different to jobseekers in the postcrisis years than it did to employers and employed individuals. In 2013, the average job-finding rate of the unemployed was only barely higher than at the trough of the recession in 2009. The decline in that rate is entirely the result of a dramatic shift—arguably the result of the crisis—in the composition of the unemployed toward those with low job-finding rates even in normal times. A boost to product demand would quickly tighten the labor market and reduce unemployment, but the crisis-induced decline in matching efficiency

would remain in place and dissipate only slowly. An unusually tight market from the perspective of employers and employed individuals would accompany the decline in unemployment.

*Labor-force participation.* The labor-force participation rate was essentially constant between 1990 and 2007, then plunged by 3 percentage points from the crisis through 2013. It has shown no sign of flattening out, much less returning to its precrisis level. About one percentage point of this fall is demographic—during the postcrisis period, baby boomers began to reach the age when participation drops rapidly through retirement. About 0.5 percentage points arise from low job-finding rates, which result in the classification of many people as out of the labor force when they are actually searching, as is apparent from their job-finding rates. Dependence on disability benefits has risen by almost another half percent of the working-age population. Dependence on earnings-contingent benefit programs—mainly food stamps and Medicaid—rose substantially after the crisis and has not declined as the labor market has tightened. These programs impose tax rates on earnings that, according to a model of participation, could account for some part of the remaining one percentage point decline in participation. The effect of low job-finding rates would respond to a boost in product demand. The relation between labor-market conditions and disability, food stamps, and Medicaid dependence is uncertain. Thus the reversal of the decline in participation resulting from these programs by a boost in product demand is equally uncertain.

## I. Total Factor Productivity

Fernald (2014) discusses many aspects of productivity growth in the postcrisis years. I confine my treatment to a limited set of observations incremental to his.

Table 1 shows that total factor productivity (TFP)—inclusive of utilization fluctuations—contributed a shortfall in output through 2010 of 3.1 percentage points, notwithstanding growth above trend in 2010. Productivity growth was essentially on its normal track in 2011 through 2013. Though the real business-cycle model launched a tradition of treating TFP as an exogenous driving force, there seems a potential case that the crisis caused the shortfall in TFP in the years immediately following the crisis. The statistical evidence on this point is remarkably weak. The standard deviation of six-year changes in Fernald's measure of TFP over the period 1948 through 2007 was 4.4 percentage points, so

the 3.5 percentage point shortfall during the years following the crisis is well under one standard deviation.

Given the volatility of medium-term TFP growth, Fernald's hypothesis is plausible that rapid TFP growth in the decade before the crisis was the result of an unsustainable burst of production and adoption of information technology, so part of the postcrisis slowdown was not the result of the crisis.

Because TFP evolves as a trended random walk, any shock, such as the shortfall below trend that cumulated to 3.5 percentage points by 2013, is presumptively permanent or nearly so. Technological advance is cumulative. The interruption that apparently—but hardly conclusively—resulted from the crisis will hold back output well into the future. Some theories of productivity growth predict gradual reversion to a growth path and others predict that shocks have permanent effects.

## II. Capital Contribution

I noted in the introduction that one of the most important legacies of the disaster that began in 2008 is the shortfall in capital resulting from the cumulation of low investment after the crisis. The business capital stock at the end of 2013 was 13.2% below its trend path. Here I include three kinds of business investment—plant, equipment, and intellectual property. I also discuss two kinds of household investment—housing and consumer durables—but these are not included in the capital stock in table 1, which refers to business and excludes both capital and output in households and government.

Investment theory emphasizes two key factors in capital accumulation: the risk-adjusted cost of capital and the demand for output. Although exceptions to the Modigliani-Miller principle abound, it remains the case that the cost of funds, hurdle rate, or discount appropriate for a given type of investment depends on the financial risk of the investment, not the mode of financing. Financial risk involves the correlation of the return with returns in general or with the marginal utility of consumption.

### A. *Risk Premiums in the Stock Market*

The stock market appears to be the best source of information about risk premiums for business earnings. The discount applicable to the earnings of a publicly traded corporation is the expected return to an

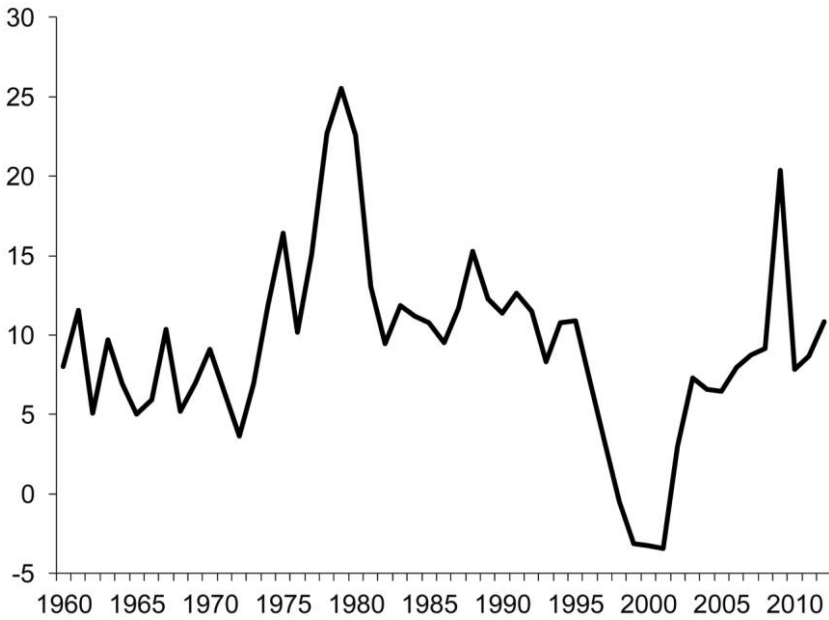


Fig. 1. The S&P risk premium, 1960 through 2012

Source: Hall (2014).

investor holding the corporation's securities. The expected return is the sum of the safe return on default-free debt plus an equity or risk premium. Although it has been common to take the risk premium as essentially a constant, around 6% per year, modern thinking in finance stresses variations over time (see Cochrane [2011] for a recent review of this issue). In particular, when the level of the stock market is high, relative to a benchmark such as dividends, expected returns are lower. Normalized consumption is another reliable predictor of returns. Figure 1 shows the risk premium for the S&P stock-price index from a regression of annual returns on those two variables (see Hall [2014] for further discussion and details of its construction). The risk premium spiked in 2009, an event surely of importance to investment.

### B. The Capital Wedge

The risk premium is one component of the wedge between the return to business capital and the risk-free interest rate. Other components are taxes, financial frictions, and liquidity premiums. To measure the total



wedge, I calculate the annual return to capital and subtract the one-year safe interest rate from it.

The calculation of the return to capital uses the following thought experiment: A firm purchases one extra unit of investment. It incurs a marginal adjustment cost to install the investment as capital. During the year, the firm earns incremental gross profit from the extra unit. At the end of the year, the firm owns the depreciated remainder of the one extra unit of installed capital. Installed capital has a shadow value measured by Tobin's  $q$ .

Installation incurs a marginal cost at the beginning of the period of  $\kappa(k_t/k_{t-1} - 1)$ . Thus the shadow value of a unit of installed capital at the beginning of the year is

$$q_t = \kappa \left( \frac{k_t}{k_{t-1}} - 1 \right) + 1 \quad (1)$$

units of capital. From its investment of a unit of capital at the beginning of year  $t$  together with the marginal installation cost—with a total cost of  $q_t p_{k,t}$ —the firm's nominal return ratio is the gross profit per unit of capital  $\pi_t/k_t$  plus the depreciated value of the capital in year  $t + 1$ , all divided by its original investment:

$$1 + r_{k,t} = \frac{1}{q_t p_{k,t}} \left[ \frac{\pi_t}{k_t} + (1 - \delta_t) q_{t+1} p_{k,t+1} \right]. \quad (2)$$

Gross profit includes pretax accounting profit, interest payments, and accounting depreciation. In principle, some of proprietors' income is also a return to capital—noncorporate business owns significant amounts of capital—but attempts to impute capital income to the sector result in an obvious shortfall in labor compensation measured as a residual. The reported revenue of the noncorporate business sector is insufficient to justify its observed use of human and other capital. Note that corporate capital as measured in the National Income and Product Accounts (NIPAs) now includes a wide variety of intangible components in addition to plant and equipment.

The implied wedge between the return to capital and the risk-free real interest rate  $r_{f,t}$  is the difference between the nominal rate of return to capital and the one-year safe nominal interest rate:

$$g_t = r_{k,t} - r_{f,t}. \quad (3)$$

This calculation is on the same conceptual footing as the investment wedge in Chari, Kehoe, and McGrattan (2007), stated as an interest

spread. Note that  $g_i$  is in real units—the rate of inflation drops out in the subtraction.

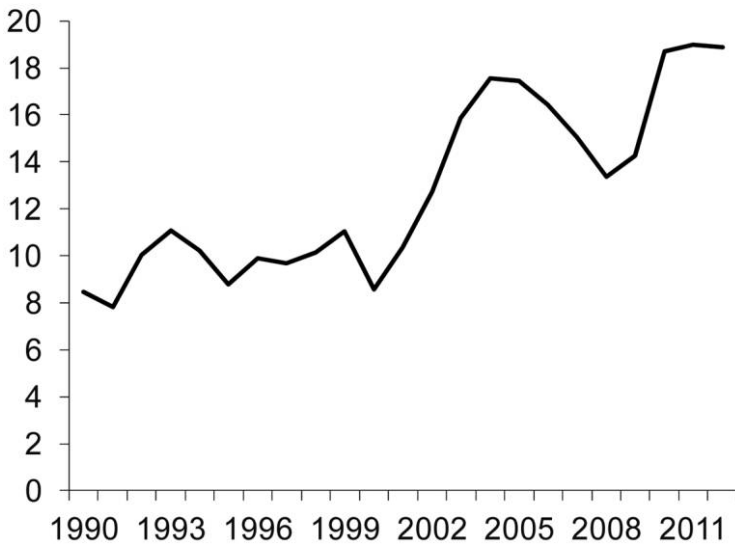
Figure 2 shows the values of the business capital wedge for two values of the adjustment cost parameter  $\kappa$ , calculated from equation (3), combining plant, equipment, and intellectual property. On the left,  $\kappa$  is taken as zero and on the right, as 2. The former value accords with the evidence in Hall (2004) and the latter with the consensus of other research on capital adjustment costs. The value  $\kappa = 2$  corresponds to a quarterly parameter of 8.

The two versions agree about the qualitative movements of the wedge since 1990, but differ substantially in volatility. The wedge was roughly steady or falling somewhat during the slow recovery from the recession of 1990, rose to a high level in the recession of 2001, declined in the recovery, and then rose to its highest level after the crisis. The two calculations agree that the wedge remained at a high level of about 18% per year through 2013.

Hall (2011) discusses the surprising power of the financial wedge over general economic activity. In an economy with a significant fraction of workers near the margin of market participation, the adverse effect of the wedge on capital formation cuts market activity in much the same way as taxes on consumption or work effort.

A comparison of the stock market risk premium in figure 1 with the capital wedge in figure 2 suggests that the effect of the financial crisis on the stock market premium was transitory while its effect on the capital-formation risk premium was persistent. Hall (2014) discusses recent thinking in finance that emphasizes the weights that different investments give to near, intermediate, and distant cash-flow claims. The stock market values flows that grow over time, so it emphasizes distant claims. Business capital pays off over intermediate terms—its average life is currently eight years. Investments in job creation last about three years, the expected duration of a new hire. All are subject to large fluctuations in annual discount rates—there appears to be no tendency for the volatility of annual forward discount rates to rise with futurity. Discount rates at different futurities appear to be only moderately positively correlated. Thus it is entirely possible that, soon after the crisis, the long forward discounts for the stock market returned to normal, while the short and medium discounts for capital and job creation remained high.

a)  $\kappa = 0$



b)  $\kappa = 2$



**Fig. 2.** The capital wedge for two values of the adjustment cost  
*Source:* US NIPAs (see spreadsheets).

### C. *Investment*

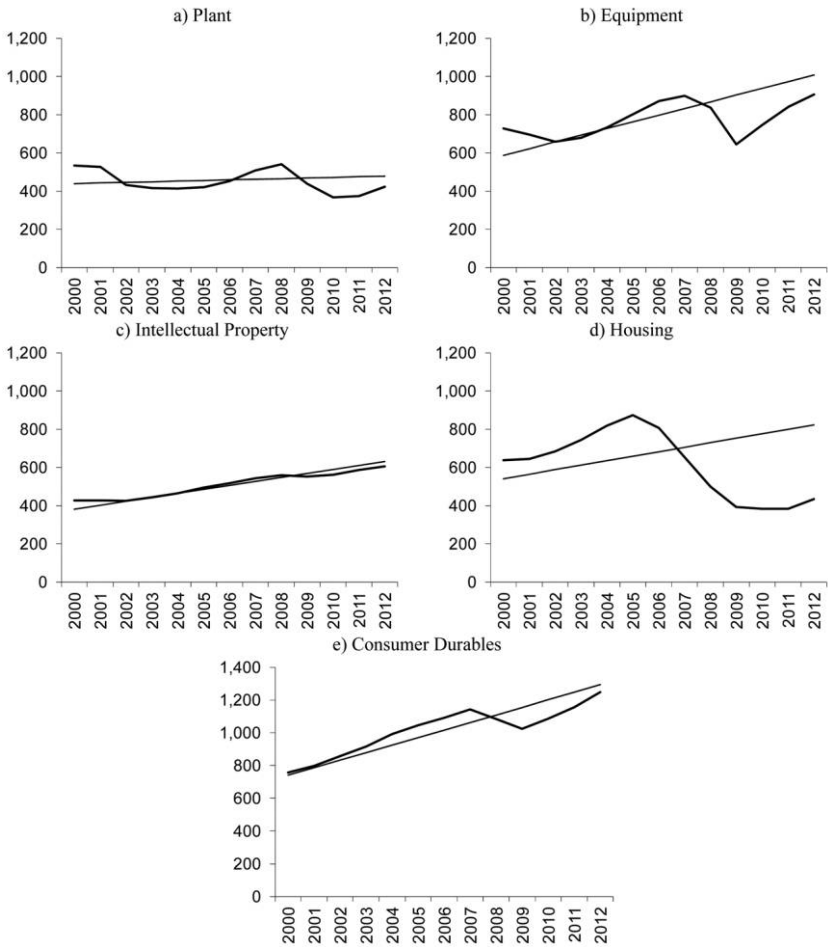
Modern investment theory, combining the ideas of Jorgenson and Tobin, views investment in general equilibrium as satisfying equation (3) with a value of the wedge reflecting the financial risk of  $r_k$  and any other factors such as taxes and frictions that separate  $r_k$  from the safe real rate  $r_k$ . In particular, forces that result in a low value of output will depress investment, along with those that raise the risk premium or frictions. A decline in the safe rate will stimulate investment to the extent that it does not widen the spread.

Figure 3 shows the paths of the five categories of investment in 2009 dollars, along with trends fitted by least squares to the data for the period 1990 through 2007. All show a negative response to the crisis sufficient to depress them below trend. The bulk of the decline below trend occurred in business equipment and in housing. Business investment plunged in 2009 at the same time that the discount in the stock market spiked. As that discount returned to normal and output began to grow, business investment returned to close to its growth path, as did consumer durable investment. However, none of those categories of investment has yet begun to make up for the shortfall in the overall capital stock described in the introduction.

By 2012, the shortfall of housing investment below trend remained huge, and accounted for most of the total shortfall in investment. The bulge in housing capital that occurred in the middle of the previous decade and the long lifetimes of houses presumably account for this fact.

### D. *Evolution of the Capital/Output Ratio*

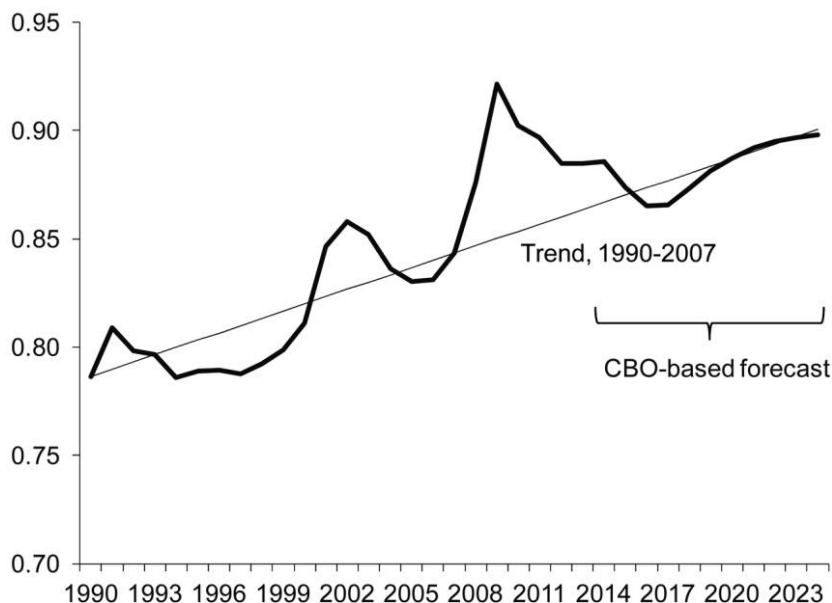
In balanced growth, the capital/output ratio is constant. After a disturbance, the ratio will return to normal—the ratio is mean reverting, a basic property of almost all growth models. Over US history since World War II, the ratio for the business sector has grown slowly, with strong mean reversion to the trend path. Figure 4 shows the ratio and the trend path, fitted as elsewhere in the paper over the period from 1990 through 2007. Immediately after the crisis, in 2009, the ratio jumped upward. Even though capital formation dropped precipitately, the capital stock remained about constant while output fell, so the ratio rose. Since then, through 2013, the normal pattern of mean-reversion has operated, as output has grown faster than has the capital stock, thanks to depressed investment.



**Fig. 3.** Components of investment compared to trend

*Source:* US National Income and Product Accounts.

The figure also shows a 10-year forecast for the capital/output ratio, based on the Congressional Budget Office’s (CBO) February 2014 forecast. I say “based on” because the CBO does not publish a forecast of real business output, the relevant concept according to a growth model, but rather real gross domestic product (GDP), including government and household production. The CBO publishes forecasts of potential and actual real GDP and potential real business output. The forecast in the figure uses the ratio of the two potential series to infer the fraction



**Fig. 4.** Capital/output ratio, with 1990–2007 trend and CBO-based forecast

Source: US National Income and Product Accounts, fixed-asset tables, and the Congressional Budget Office.

of real GDP that is real business output, and then applies that ratio to the forecast of real GDP to obtain a forecast of real business output. The resulting forecast of the capital/output ratio drops slightly below the trend path, as it did in the two other recoveries shown in the figure, and then converges to the trend path. Thus the CBO-based forecast obeys the standard growth model's principle of mean reversion.

#### *E. Conclusions about the Capital Stock*

The capital stock is an unambiguous state variable. At the end of 2013, it was 13.2% below its trend path. The crisis and Great Recession, including amplification mechanisms, appear to be responsible for the shortfall. Restoration of the shortfall can only occur gradually over a decade or more. Restoration will occur naturally because of the mean-reversion tendencies of the economy. A policy or other force that stimulates product demand may hasten the move, through the accelerator effect. On the other hand, the stimulus may raise the discount rate for investment and thereby slow down the process of putting the capital stock back on its normal growth path.

### III. Unemployment

The fraction of the labor force actually at work declined in the Great Recession as unemployment rose. On account of lower labor input attributable to unemployment, output was 2.2% lower in 2013 than it would have been along its earlier trend. The Diamond-Mortensen-Pissarides (DMP) model provides a coherent account of labor-market tightness and its various indicators, including the unemployment rate. The model, as presented in Mortensen and Pissarides (1994), takes  $\theta = V/U$ , the vacancy/unemployment ratio, as the central indicator. Two other indicators, the vacancy-filling rate for employers and the job-finding rate for jobseekers, are functions of  $\theta$ . Unemployment, on the other hand, is a state variable that converges over time to a value determined by  $\theta$ . Compared to the other state variables considered in this paper, unemployment converges rapidly to that target. Even with the low job-finding rates that occurred during the Great Recession, unemployment moves almost all the way to the value consistent with the rates of flow into and out of unemployment within a year after a shock. Unemployment is not a state variable when considering changes in the labor market over a span of more than a year.

The simplest DMP model treats the working-age population as homogeneous. The US experience since 2007 has made clear that heterogeneity has important roles in the labor market. I begin this section by contrasting tightness in the market from the points of view of three classes of agents: employers, employees, and job seekers. Unifying the three apparently divergent views requires consideration of the heterogeneity of the labor force.

#### *A. Labor-Market Tightness from the Point of View of an Employer*

The employer encounters a flow of new hires per posted vacancy equal to the market-wide average, the vacancy-filling rate  $H/V$ . Its reciprocal,  $T = V/H$ , is the expected time to fill a job. Variable  $T$  is a natural measure of tightness from the perspective of the employer. In a tight market, jobs take longer to fill. Since the end of 2000, the BLS has conducted the Job Opportunities and Labor Turnover Survey (JOLTS) to gather data on vacancies, hires, and related variables. Figure 5 shows the history of this measure of labor-market tightness.

Tightness by the  $T$  measure was high in the strong labor market of 2000, fell steeply in the recession of 2001, rose to a peak in 2006, fell sharply to a trough in 2008, and then rose back to a high value in 2012.

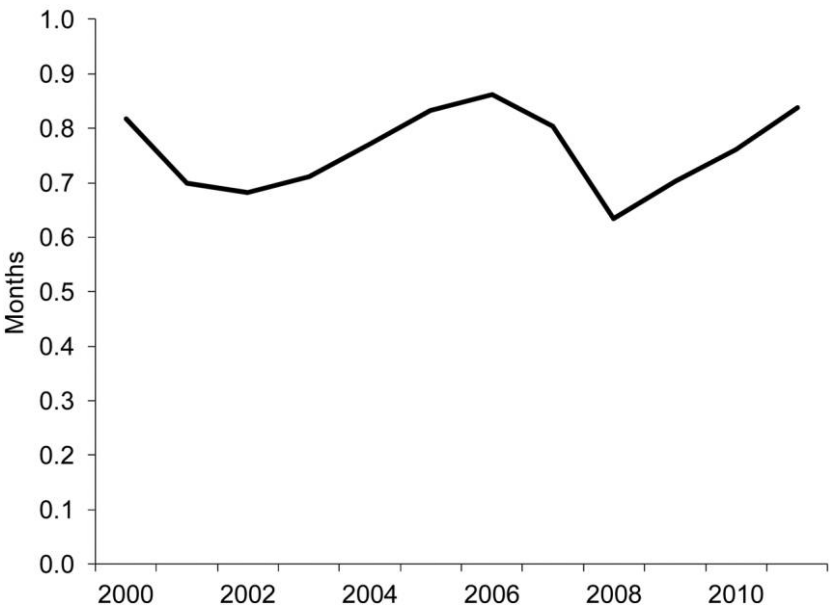


Fig. 5. Average time to fill a job vacancy, JOLTS, 2001 through 2012

Source: US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Job Opportunities and Labor Turnover Survey, ratio of job openings to hires.

From the employer’s perspective, the labor market was as tight in 2012 as in the boom year of 2006 and a bit higher than in the boom year of 2000. Business profitability has reached high levels. Incentives to create jobs are strong. Businesses have responded by recruiting aggressively and driving up the vacancy rate. The DMP model with a homogeneous labor force would say that jobs are easy to find. The job-finding rate should be high, the time to find a job short, and the unemployment rate low.

*B. Tightness from the Point of View of the Employed*

The hours of work of the employed are assumed constant in the basic DMP model, but a straightforward extension can include endogenous hours. It assumes that workers and employers agree on the efficient number of hours for the worker to put in each week. Efficient means that the worker’s marginal rate of substitution between hours and pay is the same as the employer’s value of the marginal product of an hour of work. The efficient number of hours rises if a transitory increase in the marginal product of labor occurs.

As figure 6 shows, American workers’ weekly time on the job fell



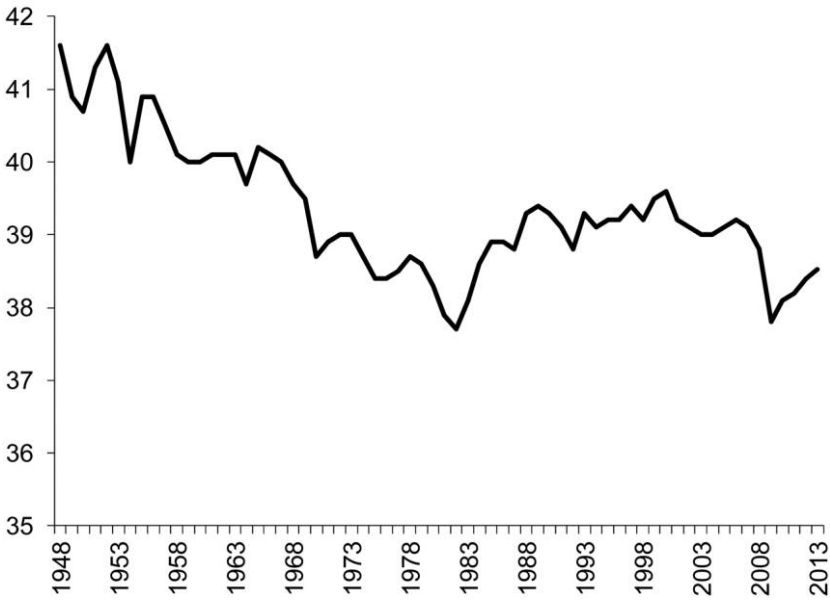


Fig. 6. Average weekly hours of work, 1948 through 2013

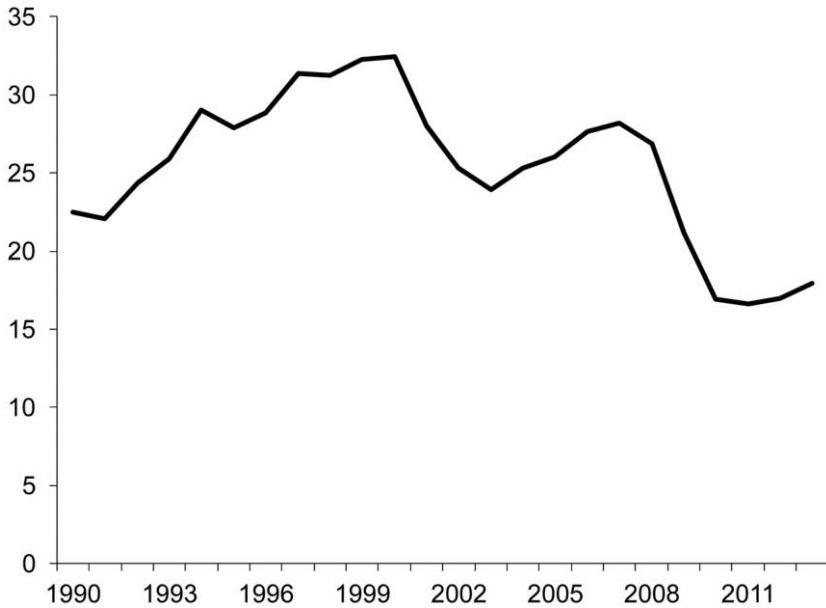
Source: US Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, series LNU02033120.

along a pronounced trend from 1948 until 1980 and has been stable except for cyclical movements since then. Workers spend more time on their jobs when the labor market is tight than when it is slack. Hours reveal the tightness of the labor market as it affects people with jobs—hours are not subject to the friction of matching job seekers and job openings. In the severe recession of 1981–1982, average weekly hours fell by about one, and the fall was even greater in 2008. In both cases, recovery of hours occurred fairly quickly, though it is uncertain what the counterfactual normal level of hours would have been absent the crisis.

Many discussions of hours use data on hours per job from payroll data. From the perspective of employment theory, however, hours per worker, as measured in the Current Population Survey (CPS), is more appropriate. Note that figure 6 uses the CPS numbers directly, whereas table 1 uses the hours figure implicit in Fernald’s data.

C. Labor-Market Tightness from the Point of View of the Unemployed

The CPS includes data on the monthly fraction of the unemployed who are employed in the subsequent month—the job-finding rate. This rate



**Fig. 7.** Job-finding rate among the unemployed, 1990 through 2013 (percent per month)  
*Source:* Ratio of series LNS17100000 to series LNU03000000, Current Population Survey.

is the natural measure of market tightness for the unemployed. Figure 7 shows that the rate in 1990, a recession year, was about 22% per month, so the average duration of unemployment was  $1/0.22 = 4.5$  months. During the long boom of the 1990s, the rate rose to a peak of 32%. The recession of 2001 and ensuing period of slack labor-market conditions saw it decline to 24% in 2003. In the following boom, it rose to 28% in 2007, then collapsed to a low point of 17% in 2009 and 2010. By 2013 it had recovered slightly to 18%. Although it is hard to discern over the period covered in the figure what the normal job-finding rate would have been in 2013 absent the disaster, it seems reasonable to say that this measure was below normal even five years after the crisis.

The failure of the job-finding rate to return to normal, despite high job-vacancy rates and recovering weekly hours, is the central topic of this section of the paper. The phenomenon has attracted attention in another form—unemployment is high in relation to the vacancy rate, meaning that the labor market is off its normal Beveridge curve. Because the Beveridge curve has one axis, the vacancy rate, that is a jump variable, and another, the unemployment rate, that is a state variable,

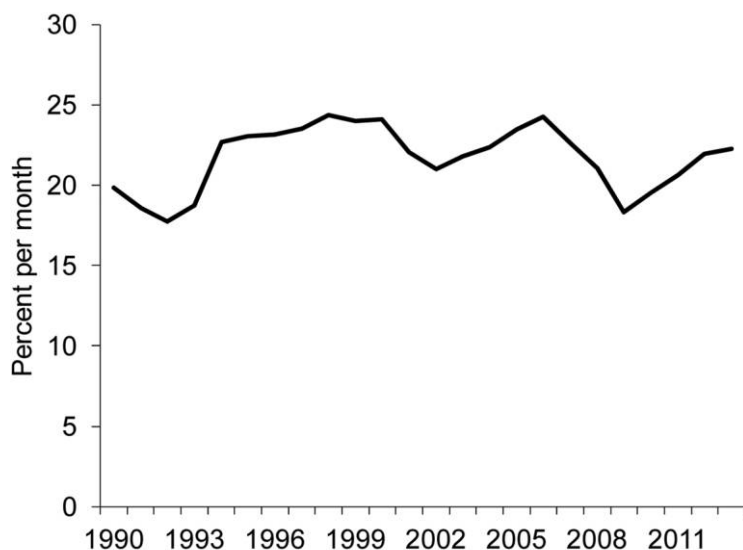
it incorporates the dynamics I mentioned earlier. The Beveridge curve tells two stories simultaneously, so I avoid casting the discussion in its form.

*D. Flows Back and Forth between Unemployment and Out of the Labor Force*

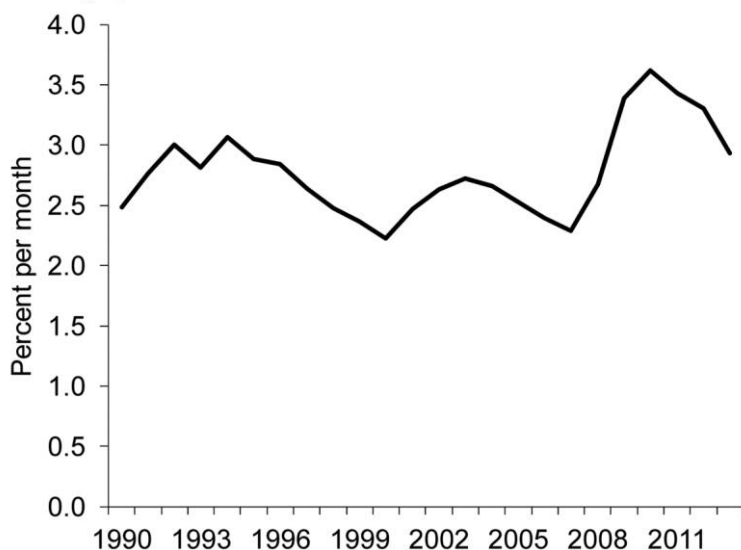
The boundary between unemployment and out of the labor force is inherently ambiguous, whereas the boundaries with employment are well defined—an individual is employed who worked at least one hour in the week before the survey. Those not employed are classified as unemployed if they have done any of a list of specific job-seeking activities in the four weeks before the survey. The remainder are out of the labor force. But some are close to the boundary of job seeker or employment—it is common for an individual who is out of the labor force to be looking actively in the following month or to be in a job. One of the most common errors in interpreting data on the work status of the population is to presume that exit from the labor force is permanent—that out of the labor force is an absorbing state. The process goes both ways: it is common for a job seeker in one month to be out of the labor force in the succeeding month. Krueger, Cramer, and Cho (2014) provide useful new evidence on this point by tabulating all 16 months of each respondent's data in the CPS.

Figure 8 shows the flows back and forth between unemployment and out of the labor force. The first is the percent of unemployed workers who leave the labor force each month. The fraction is fairly stable around 20%. It declines in recessions and rises in recoveries. In 2013, it was at its normal value. Though one might think that leaving the labor force while searching for work occurs when individuals become discouraged about the prospects of finding a job, the evidence points in a different direction—a fraction of the population tends to oscillate between job search and other activities when not at work. Panel (b) of the figure shows the reverse flow, from out of the labor force to job search. This flow rises sharply in recessions; the rise was particularly large after the crisis in 2008. It appears that contractions increase the fraction of the population in the oscillation mode. The increase in the flow from unemployment to out-of-labor-force is not long-term exit from the labor force, but a move that may well be reversed soon. Unfortunately, the CPS is not well suited to confirming this view, because its panel dimension is so short.

a) Fraction of those unemployed in one month who are out of the labor force in the next month



b) Fraction of those out of the labor market in one month who are unemployed in the next month



**Fig. 8.** Flows out of and into unemployment

*Source:* Current Population Survey (see spreadsheet for details).

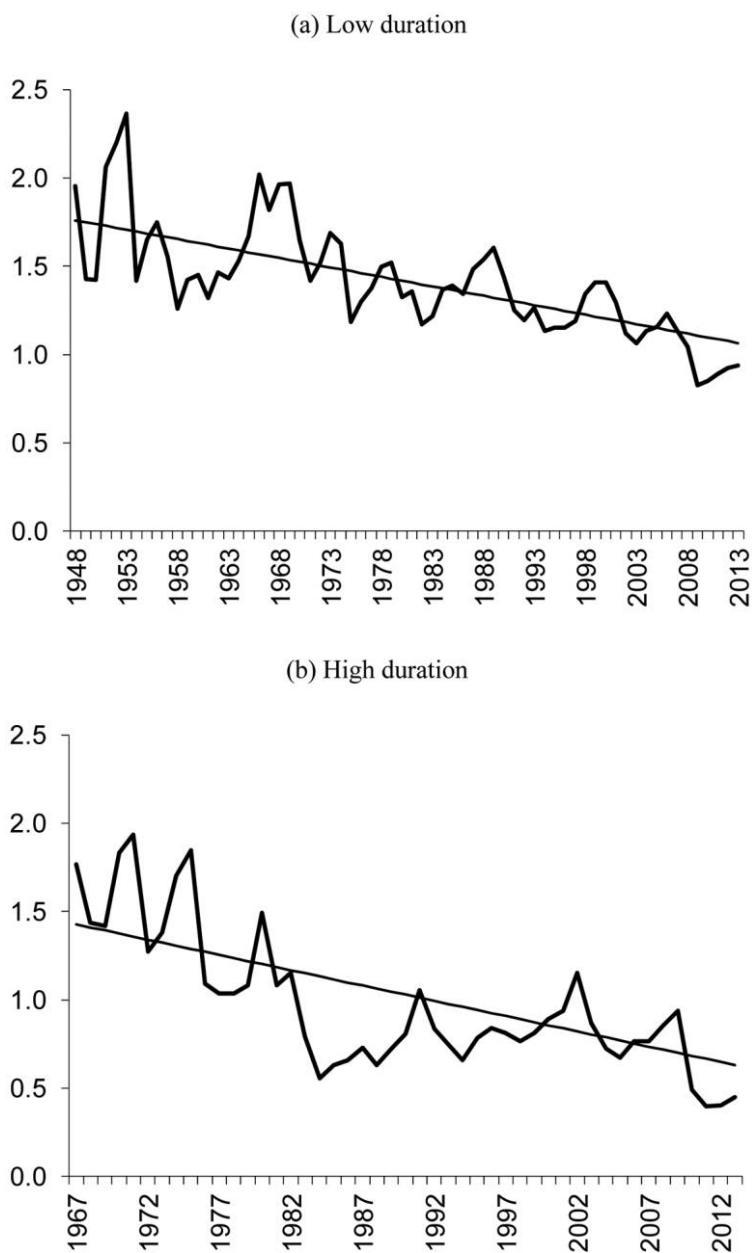
### *E. Heterogeneity among Job Seekers*

Two dimensions of observable heterogeneity among job seekers are important in understanding the puzzles of labor-market tightness and unemployment in the postcrisis US economy: duration of unemployment and the source of joblessness. By source, I mean specifically a six-way breakdown in the CPS of the events leading to job search: on layoff (with distinct possibility of recall), lost job permanently, temporary job ended, quit, new entrant, and reentrant.

Job-finding rates tend to be higher among workers who became unemployed recently compared to those who have been unemployed for many months. Further, the decline in high-duration rates tends to be greater in a recession than the decline in low-duration rates. The BLS does not report the rates by duration directly, but the agency has reported unemployment by duration categories for many years. The ratio of the number unemployed for less than five weeks to the number unemployed for 5 to 15 weeks is an index of job-finding rates for the low-duration unemployed—when the rate is high, few of the unemployed will remain in that state for, say, 10 weeks, so the higher-duration category will be depleted in relation to the low-duration category. Similarly, the ratio of those unemployed 27 to 51 weeks to those unemployed 52 weeks or more is an index of the job-finding rate among the high-duration unemployed. Figure 9 compares the two indexes.

The figure shows that the proportional decline in the job-finding rate was much higher for long-duration unemployment than for short-duration unemployment. To put it differently, the monthly rate of exit from unemployment shifted down much more after the crisis for high durations than for short durations. It is generally the case that exit rates decline with duration, but the decline was much greater in 2009 than in normal years.

The downward trend in the job-finding rate is one aspect of the general phenomenon of declining turnover in US life. Separation rates in the labor market are on a long downward trend, as is geographic mobility. Jobs are harder to find, but they last correspondingly longer, so unemployment has no upward trend. Now that the recovery from the crisis is more than five years old, it is important to keep trends in mind in studying postcrisis data to understand the effect of the crisis.



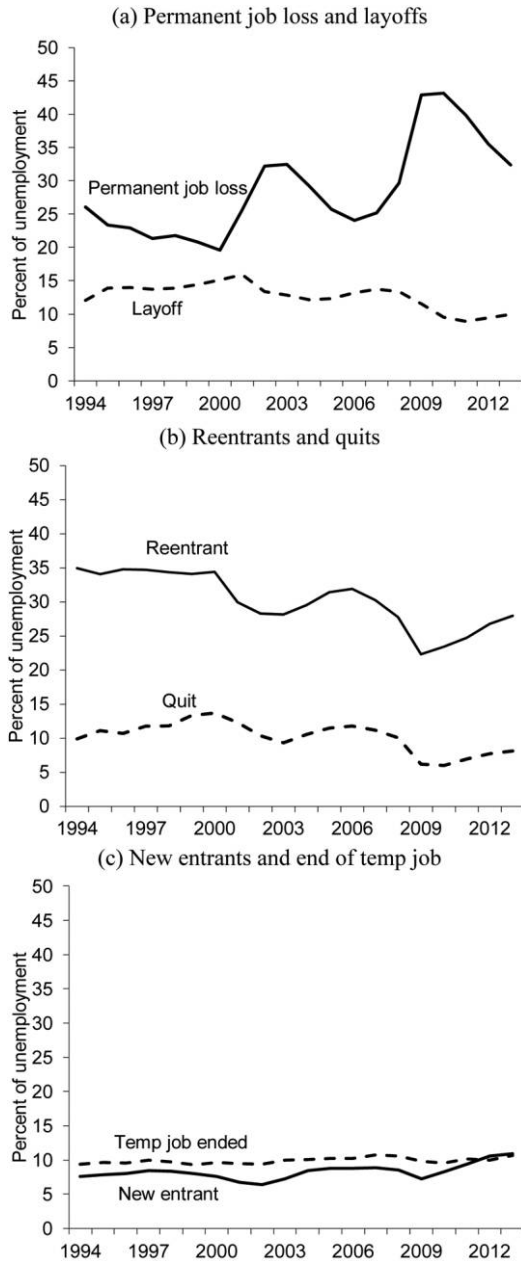
**Fig. 9.** Indexes of the job-finding rate by duration of unemployment  
*Source:* Current Population Survey (see spreadsheet for details).

### *F. The Crisis-Induced Change in the Mix of Sources of Unemployment*

Figure 10 describes the second type of observable heterogeneity, that associated with the event that resulted in the onset of jobseeking. Since 1994 the CPS has recorded the event in a six-way classification. Panel (a) shows the number of unemployed workers who are off work at their employers' initiative, as a percent of all unemployment. They have suffered either permanent job loss, with no indicated likelihood of recall, or are on layoff, with a likelihood of recall. Permanent job loss rose from about 25% of total unemployment in 2006 to almost 45% in 2009, just after the crisis. Layoff unemployment—never a large fraction of the total—fell slightly as a percent of total unemployment after the crisis. Panel (b) shows categories reflecting decisions by individuals to enter unemployment, either by moving into the labor force (reentrants) or by leaving jobs voluntarily (quits). Reentrant unemployment fell sharply around the crisis and then rose back to a normal level. Quit unemployment—also not a large fraction of the total—fell almost in half at the crisis and has returned partway to its normal fraction. Panel (c) shows the remaining two source categories, temporary job ended and new entrant. These are generally small fractions of unemployment and did not respond much to the crisis.

Table 2 shows that the composition of the unemployed shifted dramatically in the direction of permanent job loss and away from layoffs, reentrants, and quits. The composition shift matters a lot because exit rates from unemployment are considerably lower for permanent job losers than for other sources of unemployment, as the left column of the table shows. The exit rate is the sum of the flow rate from unemployment to jobs and the rate from unemployment to out of labor force. The composition effect would have lowered the exit rate by 2.5 percentage points had it occurred with the normal set of exit rates shown in the table, calculated as the averages over 2004 through 2007.

The shift of job seekers toward types less likely to exit unemployment each month resulted in higher unemployment as long as the composition shift lasted. Figure 10 shows that the composition gradually moved back to normal, but was probably not complete even five years after the crisis, in 2013. The composition is, in effect, a state variable that keeps unemployment high for a number of years but eventually returns to normal.



**Fig. 10.** Composition of unemployment by source  
*Source:* Current Population Survey (see spreadsheet for details).



**Table 2**  
Unemployment Exit Rates and Change in Composition of Unemployment, 2007–2009

Source	Normal Exit Rate, Percent Per Month	Change in Percent of Unemployment, 2007 to 2009
Layoff	64.7	–2.2
Permanent loss	41.4	17.7
Temp job	51.1	–0.9
Quit	55.7	–5.0
New entrant	49.2	–1.6
Reentrant	48.7	–8.0

Source: Current Population Survey (see spreadsheet for details).

*G. Long-Duration Unemployment and the Decline in Matching Efficiency*

My discussion of the changing composition of unemployment toward high-duration job seekers uses measures of matching efficiency, a concept rooted in the search-and-matching model. The model portrays the process of filling jobs in terms of a production function, the matching function, with output taken as the flow of hires  $H$  and factor inputs taken as the stocks of job seekers  $X$  and vacancies  $V$ :

$$H_t = m_t(X_t V_t). \tag{4}$$

Petrongolo and Pissarides (2001) suggest that the matching function is well approximated by

$$H_t = \mu_t \sqrt{X_t V_t}. \tag{5}$$

The quantity  $\mu_t$  is the efficiency of matching, analogous to the index of total factor productivity in the case of a production function. To simplify the discussion I assume this form, but none of the conclusions here depend on this particular choice. See Hall and Schulhofer-Wohl (2013) for a more extensive treatment.

The job seeker faces a monthly probability of finding and taking a job equal to  $H/X$ . Labor-market statistics for the United States do not include direct measures of the number of job seekers. Those counted as unemployed in the Current Population Survey—who did not work in the week prior to the survey and who looked actively for work in the four weeks prior to the survey—are presumably included in  $X$ . But the CPS shows that only a minority of new hires were unemployed prior to being hired. The majority moved directly from earlier jobs or were out of the labor force.

Under conditions laid out in Hall and Schulhofer-Wohl (2013), data from JOLTS make up for the absence of data on the total job seeker count  $X$ . In the total labor market, counting job seekers who are unemployed, employed, or out of the labor market, we normalize efficiency at one, so the total volume of hires is

$$H_t = \sqrt{X_t V_t}. \quad (6)$$

The effect of the normalization is to define the aggregate  $X_t$  as measured in efficiency units. Thus

$$X_t = \frac{H_t^2}{V_t} \quad (7)$$

and, in consequence,

$$\frac{H_t}{X_t} = \frac{V_t}{H_t} = T_t. \quad (8)$$

The job-finding rate for unemployed job seekers is

$$f_t = \mu_t \frac{H_t}{X_t} = \mu_t T_t \quad (9)$$

so to calculate the efficiency of matching for unemployed jobseekers, we divide the job-finding rate by the tightness measure  $T_t$ :

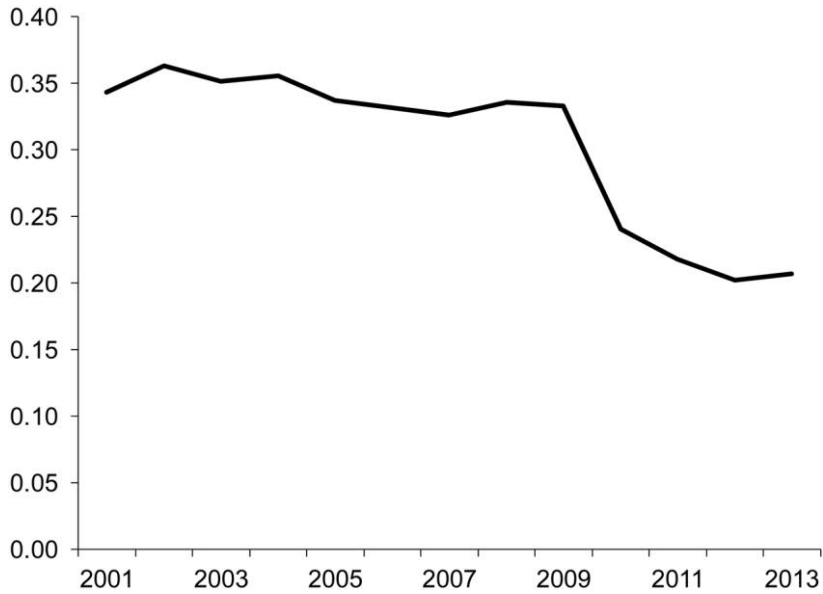
$$\mu_t = \frac{f_t}{T_t}. \quad (10)$$

This calculation treats job seekers as homogeneous.

Figure 11 shows the results of the calculation. Matching efficiency declined gradually until the crisis, then fell dramatically, reaching a low point in 2012 and rising slightly in 2013. Neglect of heterogeneity turns out to be a huge influence in these movements.

To deal with heterogeneity we apply the same approach, but to job seekers differentiated by permanent demographic characteristics and changing personal state variables, notably the six categories of unemployment source and multiple categories of duration of unemployment to date. We fit seven trinomial logit models to the job-finding hazards for the six unemployment source categories and for out of the labor force, with variables capturing demographics and unemployment duration to date. Our work studies other transition probabilities, but for the purposes of this paper, only the job-finding hazard equations are relevant.

In this setup, we define a set  $\mathbb{I}$  of buckets, crossing the seven catego-



**Fig. 11.** Matching efficiency for unemployed job seekers, treated as homogeneous  
*Source:* Current Population Survey (see spreadsheet for details).

ries of jobseekers with five categories of unemployment duration. Then for each  $i \in \mathbb{I}$ , we calculate specific matching efficiency,

$$\mu_{i,t} = \frac{f_{i,t}}{T_t}. \tag{11}$$

To measure overall matching efficiency, we form a fixed-weight index,

$$\bar{\mu}_t = \sum_{i \in \mathbb{I}} w_i \mu_{i,t}. \tag{12}$$

The weights are the population fractions in the base period before the crisis. Figure 12 shows the resulting index of overall matching efficiency. The index has a downward trend, but rose in the 2001 recession and again in 2009. The collapse of matching efficiency in figure 11 is entirely the result of a sudden shift in the composition of unemployment toward hard-to-match groups, not a true decline in efficiency. Figures in the Hall and Schulhofer-Wohl paper show that each of the seven groups had fairly smoothly declining matching efficiency from 2000 through 2012, with no significant special decline in the postcrisis years.

The finding that the large decline in matching efficiency is entirely a mix effect implies that, as the legacy of unemployment works off,

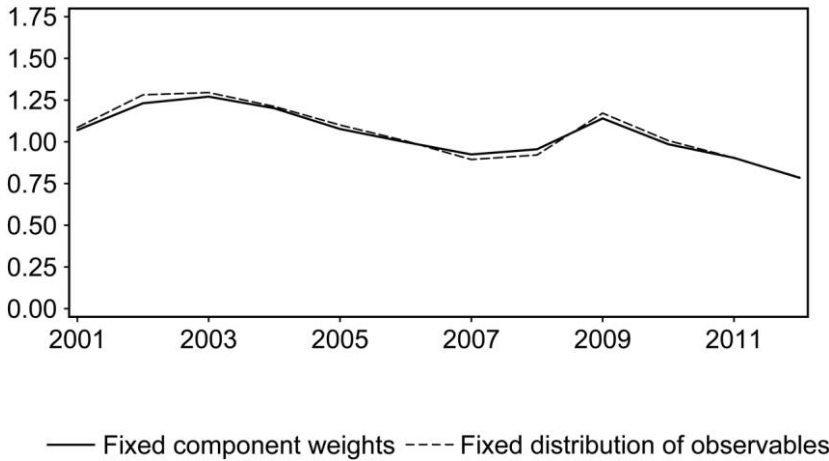


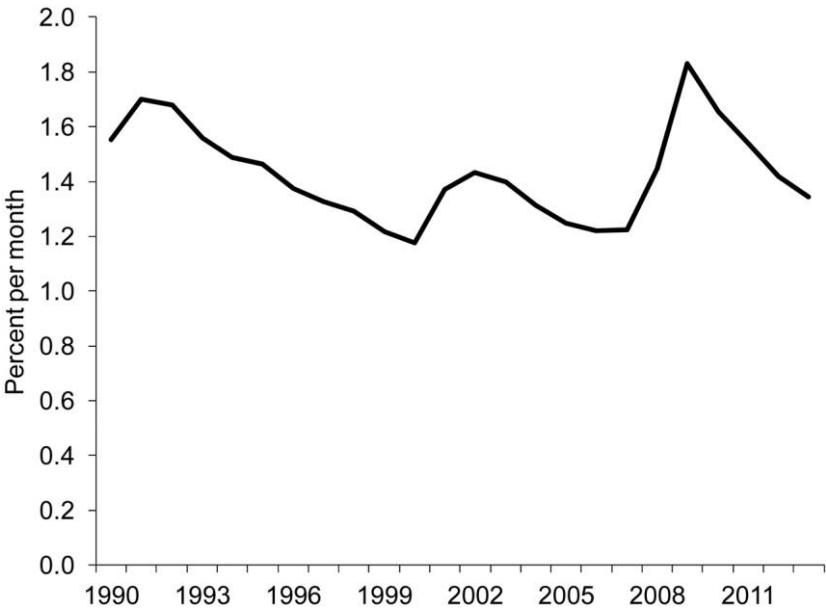
Fig. 12. Overall composition-adjusted matching efficiency

efficiency should return to its gradually declining path of the precrisis years. Historically, another gradual decline in the inflow to unemployment has offset the gradual decline in efficiency and the unemployment rate has remained remarkably steady.

The bulge in long-duration unemployment is partly the result of the crisis-induced shift toward permanent job loss. Job seekers in this category have lower exit rates from unemployment and so are more likely to advance to higher duration categories, with even lower exit rates.

#### *H. Flow from Jobs to Unemployment*

The unemployment rate depends on the inflow to unemployment from jobs and from the out-of-the-labor-market population as well as the exit rate just discussed. Figure 13 shows the more volatile of the two components, the fraction of people employed in one month who are unemployed the next month. Like many turnover measures, this one has a noticeable downward trend, interrupted by a spike in 2009. In 2013, this flow was back to its trend. Remaining excess unemployment is not the result of continuing high flows from jobs into unemployment, but from low flow rates out of unemployment, as shown in figure 7.



**Fig. 13.** Flow from jobs to unemployment

Source: Current Population Survey, ratio of series LNS17400000 to series LNS12000000.

*I. Unemployment-Conditioned Benefits*

A job seeker taking a job loses benefits from unemployment insurance. Recent papers by Nakajima (2012), Valletta and Kuang (2010), Fujita (2011), and Daly et al. (2011), culminating in Farber and Valletta (2013), ask whether higher UI benefits result in lower search effort and higher reservation wages, both of which would raise unemployment in a standard DMP model. This research compares the job-finding rates of covered workers to uncovered workers. The answer is fairly uniformly that the effects of UI enhancements during times of high unemployment in raising unemployment still further are quite small, in the range of 0.3 percentage points of extra unemployment.

Hagedorn et al. (2013) tackle a more challenging question, whether more generous UI benefits result in higher wages and higher unemployment by raising the flow value of unemployment and thus shrinking the gap between productivity and that flow value. They compare labor markets with arguably similar conditions apart from the UI benefits regime. In their work, the markets are defined as counties and the simi-

larity arises because they focus on pairs of adjacent counties. The difference in the UI regimes arises because the two counties are in different states and UI benefits are set at the state level and often differ across state boundaries. The research uses a regression-discontinuity design, where the discontinuity is the state boundary and the window is the area of the two adjacent counties. The authors conclude that, absent the increase in UI benefits, unemployment in 2010 would have been about 3 percentage points lower.

Many commentators have dismissed Hagedorn and colleagues' conclusion on the grounds that the research implies that unemployment would have hardly risen at all absent the financial crisis and resulting collapse of product demand. But that dismissal is unwarranted. Hagedorn et al.'s work fully recognizes that the enhancements of UI benefits was itself the result of the forces that caused the Great Recession. The proper interpretation, within the framework of the paper, is that feedback from enhanced UI benefits was a powerful amplification mechanism of a negative impulse arising from the crisis.

The issues that arise in evaluating the paper are those for any regression-discontinuity research design: (a) Are there any other sources of discontinuous changes at the designated discontinuity points that might be correlated with the one of interest? and (b) Is the window small enough to avoid contamination from differences that do not occur at the discontinuity point but rather elsewhere in the window? The authors explore a number of state-level economic policies that could generate cross-border effects that might be correlated with the UI effects, but none seem to matter. The authors are less persuasive on the second point. Many counties are large enough to create substantial contamination. Far from being atoms, single counties are often large parts of their states, both geographically and in terms of the share of the population. The extreme case is Washington, DC, treated as a state with only one county.

Hagedorn et al. (2014) treat the termination of extended UI benefits in North Carolina as a case study for their research. These benefits ended in June 2013. In the neighboring states of South Carolina and Virginia, extended benefits continued until the end of 2013. Employment expanded and unemployment contracted in North Carolina in the second half of 2013. To study the difference between North Carolina and the two other states, I estimated the expectation of North Carolina's values of the labor-market variables conditional on the variables in the two other states, together with a shift variable for the six months in 2013

**Table 3**  
Evidence on Labor-Market Differences between North Carolina and Neighboring States after the End of Extended UI Benefits in North Carolina

Measure	Source	Units	Effect	Standard	<i>p</i> -value
				Error	
Log employment	Payroll survey	Percent	0.25	(0.21)	0.24
	LAUS	Percent	−0.20	(0.16)	0.21
	Household survey	Percent	0.17	(1.57)	0.91
Unemployment rate	LAUS	Percentage points	−0.06	(0.10)	0.54
	Household survey	Percentage points	−0.33	(0.89)	0.71
Labor force participation rate	Household survey	Percentage points	−0.46	(0.94)	0.63

*Source:* See spreadsheets.

when North Carolina’s UI policy changed. I obtained the data from a spreadsheet posted on Mitman’s website. Table 3 shows the results. The top panel uses the three available measures of employment from the BLS’s payroll survey, its Local Area Unemployment Statistics database, and the CPS. The left-hand variable is in natural-log form—I multiply the coefficient of the dummy variable by 100 so that its units are percents. The regressions cover 1990 through 2013 for the payroll survey and LAUS data and 2000 through 2013 for the household survey. They include an AR(1) term to account for the high serial correlation of the disturbances. The estimated effects for employment are close to zero for the payroll and LAUS data and are precisely estimated, as shown by the small standard errors. The hypothesis of no difference during the policy-change period is easily accepted. For the household survey, the point estimate is also close to zero, but the standard error implies that the confidence interval includes many negative values as well as positive values. Overall, there is no evidence of an important employment effect.

The middle panel in the table gives results for the unemployment rate, in percentage points, from the two sources that measure unemployment. Both show small reductions of fractions of a percentage point, measured precisely for the LAUS and imprecisely for the household survey. Again, there is no evidence of an important effect. The bottom line in the table reports a small negative difference in the labor-force participation rate between North Carolina and the neighboring states, with a standard error of nearly one percentage point. This finding rules out large participation effects and gives no positive support to any meaningful effect.

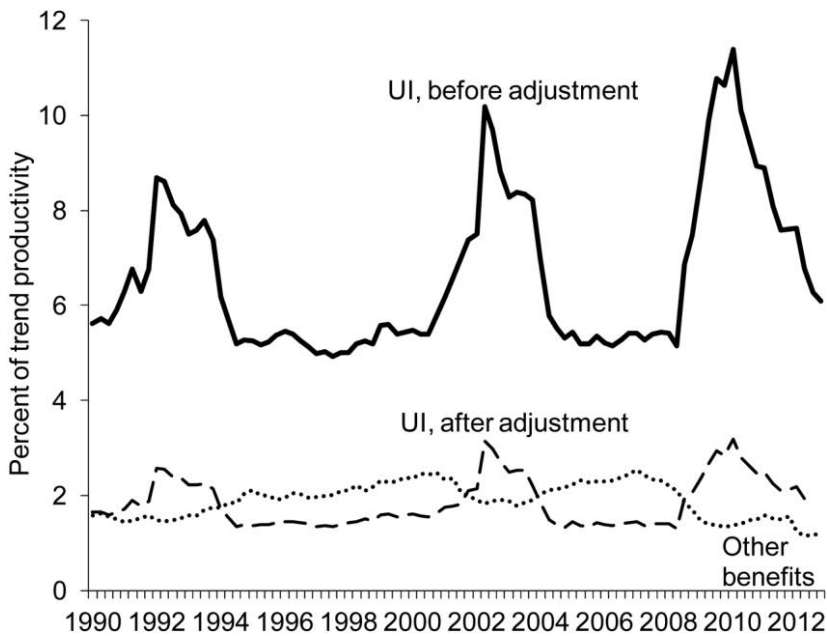
Overall, the case study of North Carolina does not appear to support Hagedorn et al.'s finding of large effects from changes in UI benefits. But Hagedorn and colleagues have ignited an important debate. Further discussion may help resolve the issue of the reliability of their finding of such large effects on wages and unemployment.

Chodorow-Reich and Karabarbounis (2013) study movements of a variety of unemployment-conditioned benefits, including UI. They conclude that both the level and movements of the effective subsidy for unemployment are trivial. From microdata, they measure the effect of unemployment on the opportunity cost of taking a job, stated as a percent of average worker productivity. One component is the loss of benefits that occurs upon taking a job. On average, the loss of benefits—UI, food stamps, welfare, and Medicaid—contributes only 3.5 percentage points to the opportunity cost. Although that contribution is higher when unemployment is high, the fluctuations are necessarily small and other components of the opportunity cost offset them.

With respect to UI, the authors observe that only around a third of the unemployed receive benefits. The others are ineligible or unwilling to apply. Further, about a quarter of UI benefits go to people who are not unemployed because they do not meet the standard criterion of search effort or because they work part-time but earn less than the applicable cap. Almost all of the increase in benefits in general arises from UI, however, as they find that the unemployment-conditioned part of food stamps, welfare, and Medicaid is tiny. The first two of these programs are fairly small and Medicaid, though large, goes mainly to people who are disabled or elderly.

Figure 14 shows the findings of the paper for UI and for other benefits. The highest line shows the results of the regression at the microlevel of UI benefits on the incidence of unemployment (annual UI receipts divided by fraction of the year unemployed). The lower line, labeled “UI, after adjustment” adjusts downward dramatically to account for (a) the probability that benefits will exhaust before the individual finds a later job, if the individual declines a job offer while receiving UI benefits, and (b) the costs to the individual of participating in UI. The UI benefits spike in recessions, reaching around 4% of productivity in those of 1973–1975, 2001, and 2007–2009. The spike in the Great Recession was only about 0.5 percentage points above the two earlier major spikes. By 2012, the benefit rate was about halfway back to its precrisis level. The behavior of the unemployment-conditioned component of food stamps, welfare, and Medicaid combined was altogether different. It had a steep





**Fig. 14.** Unemployment-conditioning of UI and other benefits (from Chodorow-Reich and Karabarbounis 2013).

upward trend from 1982 through 2005, then fell substantially during the period this paper studies.

The magnitude of the downward adjustment to UI benefits is surprisingly large. Most of it reflects an imputation of compliance cost to the UI recipient. The authors make this adjustment by asking why so many eligible workers decline to apply for UI benefits. They fit a convex cost function to time-series data on the take-up rate for benefits. They believe that their imputation is in line with the findings of earlier research on UI benefits, based on how much reported reservation wages respond to benefit levels.

Though Chodorow-Reich and Karabarbounis (2013) focus on measuring the benefits lost when a worker moves from unemployment to employment as a topic in fluctuations modeling, their findings are important for broader issues. First, their findings appear to be quite inconsistent with the mechanism that Hagedorn et al. describe. Not only is the UI effect small and transitory, but the decline in unemployment conditioning for other benefits offsets a good part of that effect. The small remaining net effect of increased attraction to remaining unem-

ployed seems incapable of explaining the wage increase that Hagedorn and colleagues found, along with declines in vacancies and increases in unemployment caused by that increase, according to the Hagedorn et al. model.

Second, Chowdrow-Reich and Karabarbounis's results—and even more, results that a related research strategy might generate—bear on the role of benefits in the substantial decline in labor-force participation that followed the crisis. Chowdrow-Reich and Karabarbounis ask what would be on the mind of an unemployed individual considering a job offer. A similar strategy could study what would be on the mind of an individual not currently in the labor force who was considering entering the labor force by starting a job search.

### *J. Conclusions about Unemployment*

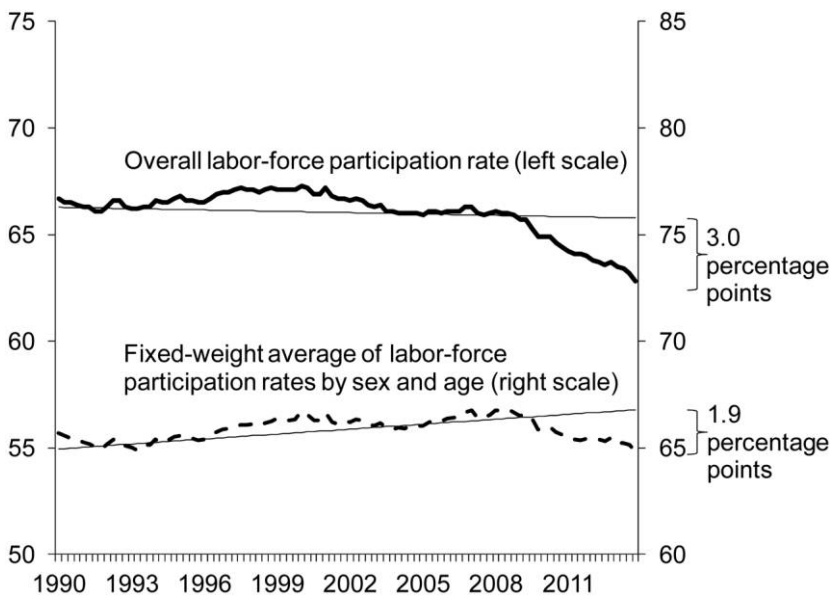
Although unemployment is a state variable in the search-and-matching model with homogeneous job seekers, exit rates from unemployment are so high, even after a shock as great as the crisis in 2008, that unemployment melts away rapidly once the labor market returns to normal tightness. In a model that recognizes the role of heterogeneity, a force that shifts the inflow to unemployment toward individuals with low exit rates will cause elevated unemployment as long as that shift lasts. Further, the decline in exit rates with unemployment duration amplifies the effect. The evidence is compelling that this mechanism kept unemployment high for at least five years after the crisis.

The response of policy to high unemployment through the extension of UI benefits is another amplification mechanism. Its strength is a matter of intense debate, but all research and economic logic confirms that some amplification occurred.

## **IV. Labor-Force Participation**

Table 1 shows a growing shortfall of the labor-force participation rate during the postcrisis period. Unlike the employment rate and hours per week, which closed some of their shortfalls by 2010 or 2011, participation has continued to shrink. A key issue in the analysis of the effects of the crisis is whether participation will ever return to normal once the adverse effects of the crisis dissipate, or whether participation will remain at its current low level or fall even more.

Figure 15 shows two measures of the labor-force participation rate.



**Fig. 15.** Standard and fixed-weight measures of labor-force participation, 1990 through 2013.

*Source:* Current Population Survey (see spreadsheets for details).

The upper line is the standard measure—the ratio of the number of people over age 16 in the labor force (employed + unemployed) to the population over age 16. The measure includes mix effects. Most of these arise from the oldest age group, which accounts for a growing fraction of the population. That group also has the lowest participation rate, so part of the decline in the standard measure arises from the aging of the population associated with declining mortality rates for people in their sixties and seventies.

The thin line in the upper part of the figure is the linear trend fitted by least squares for the years 1990 through 2007, as in table 1. The standard measure follows a slight downward trend with mild cyclical movements through 2007, then drops by 3.0 percentage points from 2007 to 2013. Note that this figure exceeds the one in table 1, which is multiplied by labor’s factor share.

The lower line in the figure, with scale on the right, shows a fixed-weight index that is immune to sex and age mix effects (age is 16 through 19, 20 through 24, 25 through 34, 35 through 45, 45 through 54, and 55 and older). It applies the average population fraction over the

period 1990 through 2013 to the participation rates within each of the 12 demographic groups. Its trend is noticeably upward. During the postcrisis period, it drops below trend by 1.9 percentage points.

The conclusion is that mix effects special to the postcrisis period account for 1.1 percentage points of the decline in participation. The increase in the population fraction from 2007 to 2013 was 2.0 percentage points for men age 55 and over and 1.9 percentage points for women in that age group. The youngest member of the group in 2007 was born in 1952 and the youngest in 2013 was born in 1958. The extra 1.1 percentage points were the effect of the entry of the baby boomers to the lower-participation age group. Forecasts of future participation rates show similar declines as the boomers retire in larger numbers.

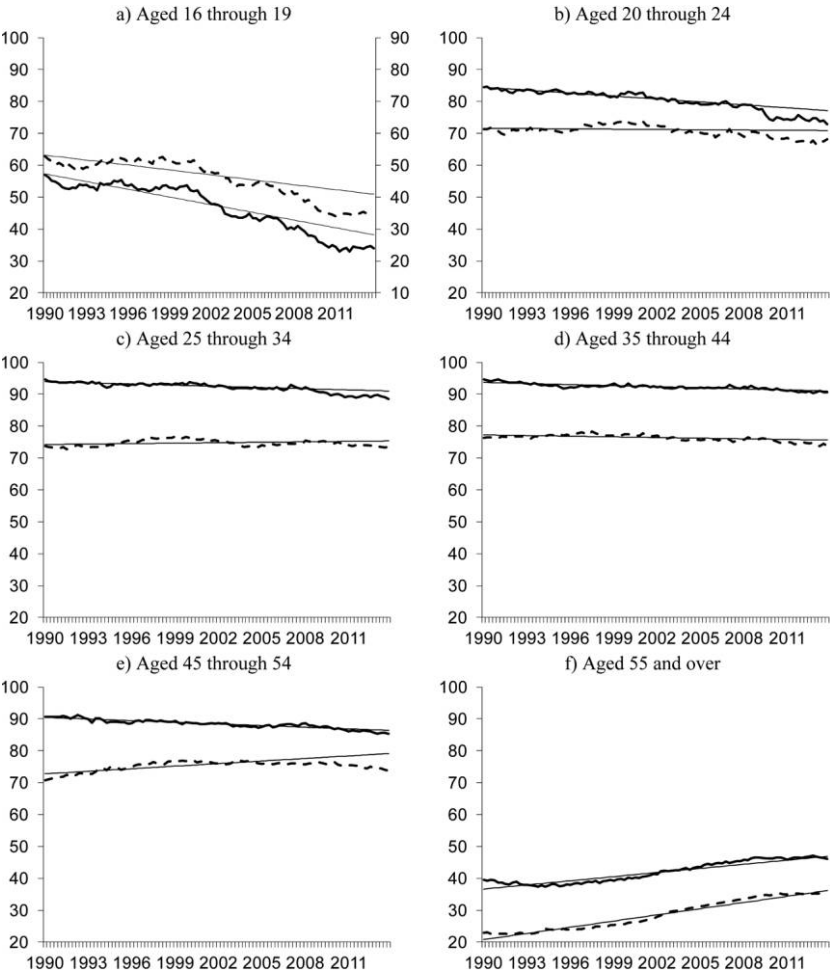
Figure 16 shows the participation rates for the 12 demographic groups, along with linear least-squares trend lines estimated from 1990 through 2007. During the postcrisis period, the declines below trend occurred among those aged 16 through 34 and women aged 25 through 54. During the crisis period starting in 2008, the upward trend in participation among both men and women aged 55 and above was only slightly less than in the period from 1990 through 2007.

Table 4 shows that people age 45 and above contributed disproportionately to the post-2007 shortfall of participation relative to trend, and that women played a larger role in the disproportion than men. Rising take-up rates for disability may play a role among the older groups.

Figure 17 shows a comparison of the trend of precrisis participation by education groups (less than high school graduation, high school graduation only, some college, and college graduation) to postcrisis participation. The figure displays a fixed-weight index over the period from 1992 through 2013. Note that the trend of the fixed-weight index is downward whereas the fixed-weight index based on sex-age groups, in figure 15, is upward. Participation rises sharply with education, and education advanced steadily during the three decades. The shortfall from trend in 2013 based on education was 2.4 percentage points. This figure overlaps somewhat but not entirely with the earlier one based on sex and age. Calculations based on sex-age-education groups would yield a larger estimate of the participation shortfall, I believe.

#### *A. Turnover and Participation*

As the participation rate has continued to decline at the same time as unemployment, many commentators have concluded that unemploy-



**Fig. 16.** Labor-force participation rates by sex and age

*Note:* The line for teenage women uses the right-hand scale so that it does not lie atop the line for men. In the other age groups, the upper (blue) line is for men and the lower (red) line is for women.

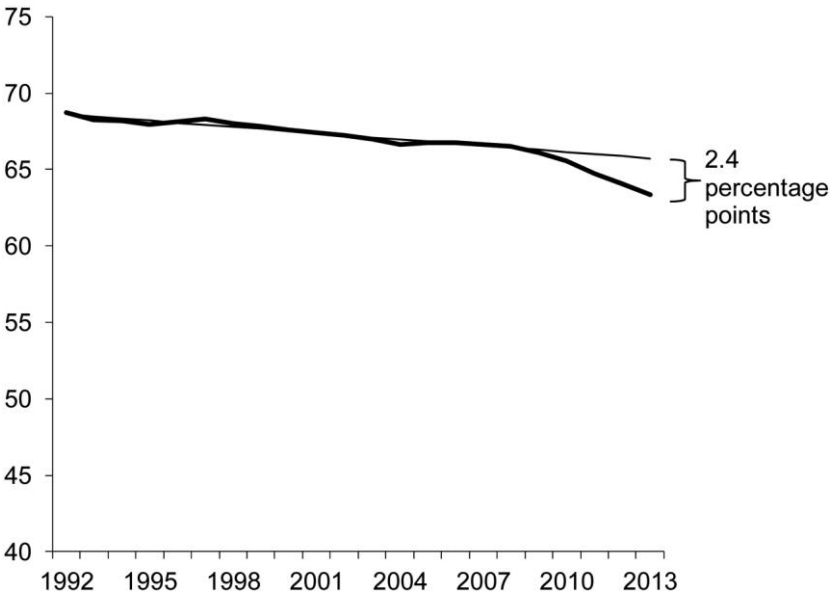
*Source:* Current Population Survey (see spreadsheets for details).

ment is declining because unemployed individuals are leaving the labor force rather than taking jobs. But this view is a drastic oversimplification that overlooks high rates of turnover among activities in the working-age population. In the typical month of 2013, 2.5 million people left the labor force while unemployed, more than the 2.2 million

**Table 4**  
Contributions of Sex-Age Groups to Participation Shortfall, 2007 through 2013

Age	Men	Women	Sum
16–19	0.06	0.17	0.23
20–24	0.18	0.05	0.24
25–34	0.20	0.11	0.31
35–44	0.04	0.13	0.17
45–54	0.19	0.35	0.53
55+	0.27	0.43	0.70
All	0.95	1.24	2.19

Source: Current Population Survey (see spreadsheets for details).



**Fig. 17.** Fixed-weight index of participation by education, with 1992 through 2007 trend  
Source: Current Population Survey (see spreadsheets for details).

who took jobs. But 3.7 million people who were previously out of the labor force took jobs without intervening unemployment and another 2.6 million started to search for work. Many people counted as out of the labor force will move back into the labor force quite soon.

Though many discussions of labor-market dynamics refer to a popu-

lation that is always in the labor force and move between employment and unemployment, the two-activity model cannot possibly describe the US labor market. On the other hand, a three-activity model—not in the labor force (N), unemployed (U), and employed (E)—is a useful way to understand the basics of the turnover process. The model has six transition rates, designated NE, NU, UE, UN, EN, and EU, in an obvious notation. The fraction of people in an activity who remain in that activity in the following month are residuals—for example,  $NN = 1 - NE - NU$ .

Table 5 shows, on the left, the six transition rates for the average month in 2013 and the average month in the precrisis years 2005 through 2007. The data come from the Current Population Survey. The corresponding stationary distributions across activities appear in the upper-right-hand corner of the table. Note that U is the fraction of the population that is unemployed, not the standard unemployment rate stated as a fraction of the labor force, which is  $U/(U + E)$ . In 2013, U was 1.4 percentage points higher than in 2005–2007, but N was 3.3 percentage points higher. The reduction in participation was more than twice as large as the increase in unemployment.

The lower-right-hand block in table 5 shows the separate influences of each of the six transition rates. Each row shows the implied distribution across activities if all but one of the transition rates had its precrisis value and the one named at the left had its 2013 value. Thus the figures in the block would be the same as in the line above for 2005 through

**Table 5**  
Transition Rates and Implied Stationary Distributions among Activities

	Transition Rates		Implied Distribution of Activities		
	Actual 2013	Actual 2005–2007	N	U	E
Actual 2013			36.8	4.5	58.7
Actual 2005–2007			33.5	3.1	63.4
NE	4.1	5.1	37.0	3.2	59.8
NU	2.9	2.4	32.4	3.4	64.2
UE	19.3	27.5	34.7	3.7	61.6
UN	22.3	23.5	33.2	3.2	63.6
EN	2.7	2.8	33.0	3.1	63.9
EU	1.3	1.2	33.8	3.3	63.0

Source: Current Population Survey (see spreadsheets for details).

2007 except for the role of the single transition rate for the line, shown at the left.

In the top line of the lower-right-hand block of the figure, for the NE job-finding transition, lowering the rate to 4.1% per month from its precrisis level of 5.1% boosts the nonparticipating N fraction from 33.5% to 37.0 %, just above its actual 2013 level. In other words, the decline in participation as of 2013 was entirely the result of the one-percentage-point decline in the job-finding rate of nonparticipants. It is not that more people were dropping out of unemployment and leaving the labor force permanently—in fact, the UN transition rate was a bit lower in 2013 than before the crisis. Rather, the rate of job-finding among nonparticipants, NE, was lower. This finding coincides with the general belief that a fraction of people classified as out of the labor force are actually job seekers and, in normal times, succeed in finding jobs in large volumes despite exerting search efforts insufficient to meet the survey's criteria for classification as unemployed. In 2006, more than twice as many nonparticipants found jobs in the typical month as did those classified as unemployed.

Most of the other lines in table 5 are similar to the actual figures for the precrisis years, 2005 through 2007. One exception is an obvious one—the job-finding rate for the unemployed, UE, at 19.3% per month was substantially below its precrisis level of 27.5%, which accounts for a good part of the elevation of the unemployment rate in 2013 (4.5% of the population) over its precrisis level (3.1%). The other contributor was the elevation of the transition rate NU, from out of the labor force to unemployed. In the slacker labor market of 2013, it was more likely that a person out of the labor force who decided to seek work would go through a period of active search and be counted as unemployed, rather than finding a job without intervening unemployment.

This examination of labor-market dynamics suggests that some part, perhaps fairly large, of the decline in measured participation is actually the result of the slowing down of the process of finding work among people who are interested in working but whose search efforts do not place them among the unemployed, as defined in the CPS.

### *B. The Extended Labor Force*

The standard measure of the labor force that underlies the measurement of participation excludes many people who have a demonstrated interest in working, but do not satisfy the survey's definition of active



search. The definition calls for explicit job-seeking actions in the four weeks prior to the survey. For example, Hall and Schulhofer-Wohl (2013) show that the number of people who take new jobs, having been out of the labor force in the prior month, is larger than the number who were counted as unemployed. The BLS tabulates additional candidates from among those classified as out of the labor force. One is called *marginally attached*. It brings in people who want to work and are available to work, but who have not searched actively in the past four weeks. The other, rather smaller, is called *discouraged*—its members want to work but believe no jobs are available.

An obvious question is how measures of participation are affected by adding these groups to those in the conventional labor force who worked in the survey week or were actively searching in the prior four weeks. Figure 18 graphs the data. It seems fair to say that the same factors influence the extended labor force. It displays the same downward trend as the conventional measure starting in 2008 and continuing to

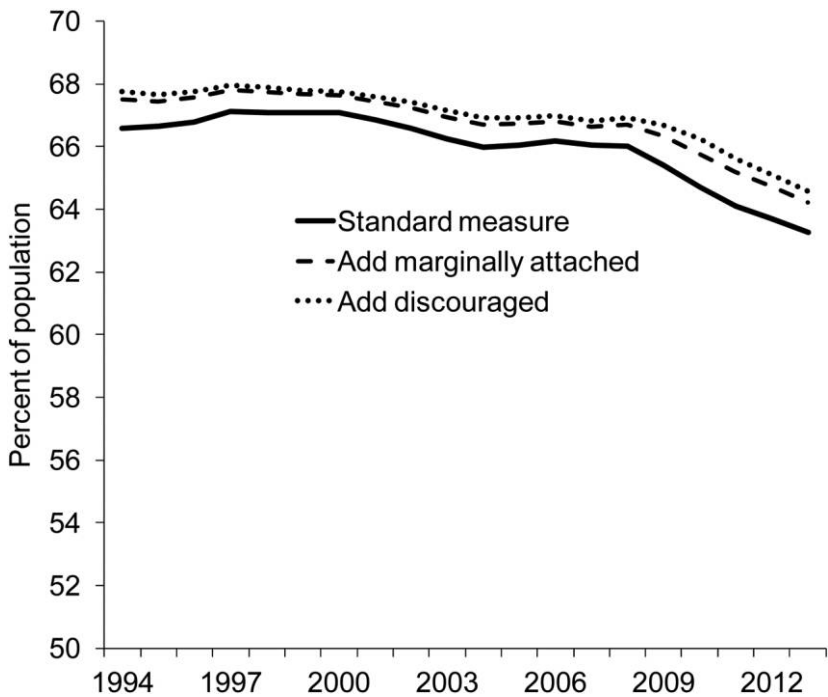


Fig. 18. Conventional and extended measures of the labor force

Source: Current Population Survey (see spreadsheets for details).

**Table 6**  
Increments to the Labor-Force Participation Rate, in Percentage Points, from Inclusion of Marginal and Discouraged Individuals

Year	Marginal	Discouraged	Both
2008	0.05	0.02	0.08
2009	0.30	0.16	0.46
2010	0.41	0.32	0.73
2011	0.43	0.24	0.67
2012	0.39	0.20	0.60
2013	0.32	0.18	0.50

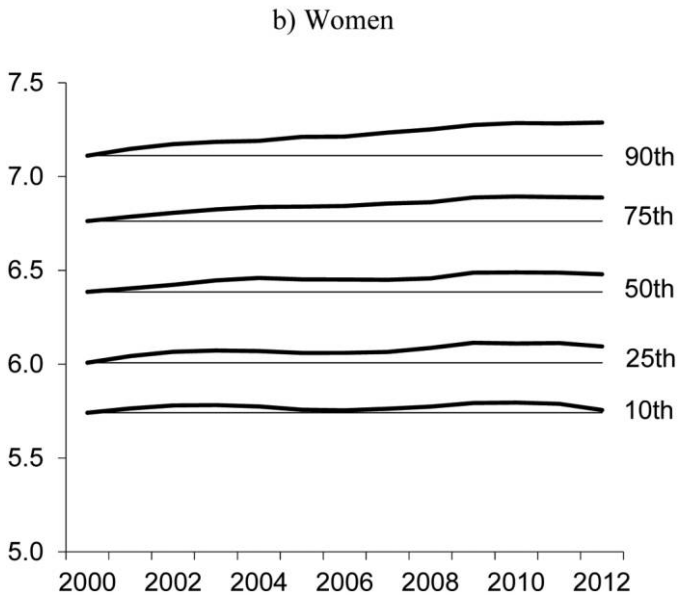
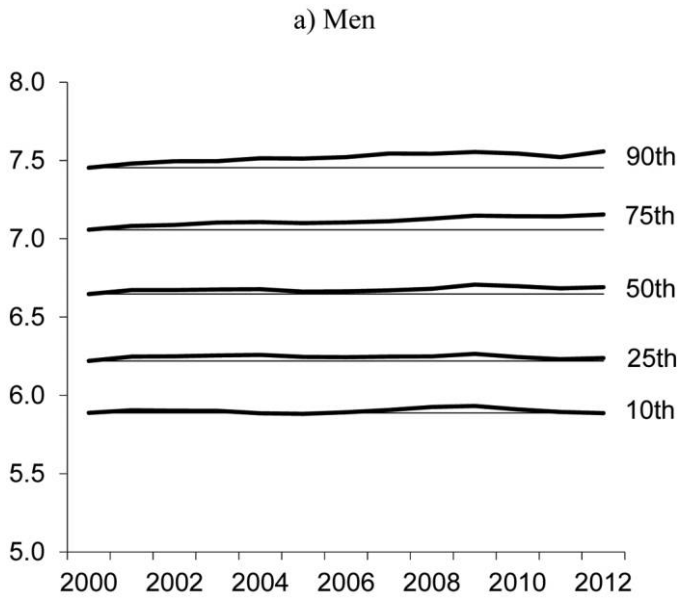
*Source:* Current Population Survey (see spreadsheets for details).

decline at the same rate even after unemployment and other measures of slack turned around.

Table 6 shows the increments, in fractions of percentage points, to the participation rate if either or both of the additional groups were included in the labor force. In 2013, including both would raise the participation rate by half a percentage point. This amount is a nontrivial component of the roughly two percentage point decline in the mix-adjusted participation rate.

*C. Widening of the Earnings Distribution*

For men and women separately and by year since 2000, the BLS compiles five quantiles of the normal weekly earnings of full-time workers. The points are the 10th percentile (series LEU0252911600 and LEU0252912000), the 25th percentile (series LEU0252911700 and LEU0252912100), the 50th percentile (series LEU0252881800 and LEU0252882700), the 75th percentile (series LEU0252911800 and LEU0252912200), and the 90th percentile (series LEU0252911900 and LEU0252912300). The comparable participation rates are series LNS11300001 and LNS11300002. Figure 19 shows the distributions for the years 2000 through 2012. The thin black lines show the levels in each quantile in 2000, to make the movements by year easier to spot. The figure confirms widely reported facts about earnings in recent decades—the dispersion of earnings rose, with earnings at the bottom of the distributions remaining constant in real terms and those at the top growing moderately. The distribution in the figure overstates the earnings opportunities of the population because it includes only those



**Fig. 19.** Five quantiles of the distributions of real weekly earnings, 2000 through 2012  
*Source:* See text.

who have found jobs. Note that earnings growth is generally substantially higher for women than for men.

The widening of the earnings distribution has a role in discouraging participation. Participation among high-wage workers is close to saturation—the increase in wages that has taken place in recent years could not have raised their participation much. On the other hand, two factors combine to reduce participation among low-wage workers: the stagnation of their wages and the fact that some of them are in households containing higher-wage workers who generate the bulk of household income. The rise in household income lowers participation among low-wage household members through an income effect. An implication of the widening earnings distribution is that more specialization occurs in the labor market. In particular, a declining fraction of teenagers work or look for work because, in some cases, their parents are earning more and the contribution to family income from the low wages available to teenagers is too low to attract them to the market or to make their parents push them to work.

#### *D. Job-Finding Rates and Participation*

A low job-finding rate discourages labor-force participation by raising the difficulty of finding market employment. Historically, the effect was quite small. Participation hardly declined in recessions prior to the crisis.

In a survey of UI benefits recipients with detailed weekly recording of search effort, Krueger and Mueller (2011) found that search time is about 1.7 hours per day or 12 hours per week. This figure is somewhat higher than found in time-use studies. Search time is close to constant across all the duration categories in the survey. From the same survey, Mueller and Hall (2014) find a weekly frequency of job offers of 5.8% with an acceptance rate of 72%. After adjustment for offers not yet accepted or rejected (21%), we calculate a job-finding rate of 4.8% per week. Thus the expected duration of search to find a job is  $1/0.048 = 21$  weeks. Expected search time to find a job is  $21 \times 7 \times 1.7 = 244$  hours. Job-finding rates fell approximately to half their normal levels in 2009 and 2010. Thus the extra search time was 122 hours.

A typical job lasts about three years, or 6,000 hours at 2,000 hours per year. To state search cost as a tax on work effort, one needs the value of time diverted from other nonwork activities stated as a ratio to the earnings from work. Research on this ratio, often called  $z$ , has been ac-

tive recently, but without achieving a consensus. One source of information is reported reservation wages. These tend to be close to actual wages. Krueger and Mueller (2013, figure 2b), report that the average ratio of reservation wages to prior actual wages in their survey is 0.92. The optimal reservation wage can be higher than the opportunity cost of work, if taking a job forecloses the option of finding a higher wage. But the reservation wage can never be below the opportunity cost. The finding of high-stated reservation wages is inconclusive. Further, Mueller and Hall (2014) show a substantial upward bias in stated reservation wages in the Krueger-Mueller survey—respondents frequently take jobs paying less than their earlier reported reservation wage, but more rarely decline jobs paying more.

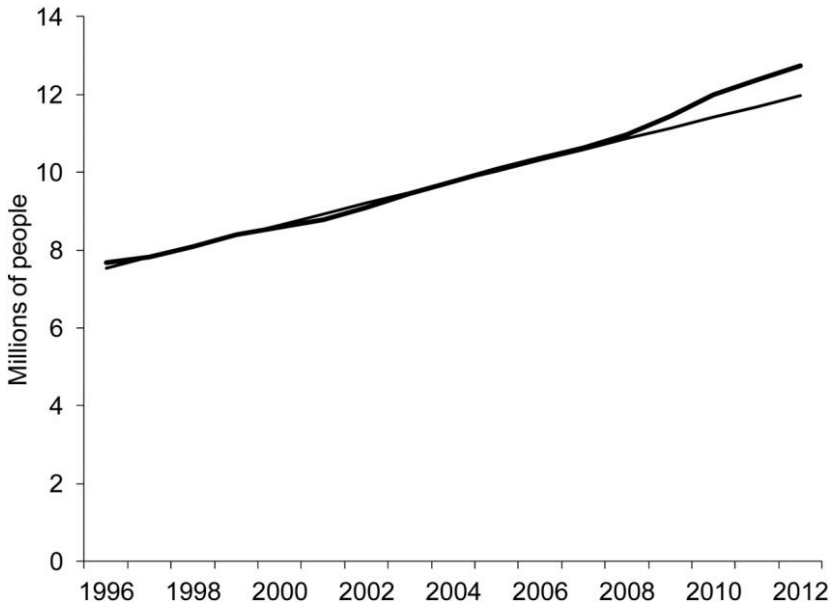
As Hornstein, Krusell, and Violante (2011) point out, the opportunity cost inferred from data on search behavior is generally low, even negative. Job seekers accept jobs with such a high frequency that they must impute a low benefit to remaining unemployed.

The research discussed above deals with the opportunity cost of moving from no work to a full-time work schedule, which presumably drives up the marginal value of nonsearch time spent at home, as it declines by a substantial amount, say 40 hours per week. The opportunity cost of about 12 hours of weekly search should logically be lower. Aguiar, Hurst, and Karabarbounis (2013) show that the displaced activities are mainly socializing, watching TV, and sleeping.

If the opportunity cost of search is 0.5 times the wage of the subsequent job, the tax arising from the increase in search time is  $0.5 \times 122/6000$  or 1.0%. For workers age 25 to 55 without child-care responsibilities, the tax probably has small effects on participation—the income effect offsets the substitution effect. But for younger and older people, who are closer to the margin between work and nonwork, that tax could be part of the story of declining participation during the years when job-finding rates were seriously depressed. Table 4 shows that a disproportionate share of the decrease in participation occurred outside of the middle-age groups. With job-finding rates returning to near normal levels by mid-2014, this effect has reversed itself, however.

#### *E. Disability Benefits under Social Security*

Two programs under Social Security pay benefits to disabled individuals. Recipients lose some or all of the benefits if they work, so the programs discourage participation in the labor force by recipients who are



**Fig. 20.** Number of recipients of Social Security Disability benefits Age 18 through 64 (in millions).

Source: [http://ssa.gov/policy/docs/statcomps/ssi asr/2012/sect03.xlsx](http://ssa.gov/policy/docs/statcomps/ssi%20asr/2012/sect03.xlsx).

capable of work, a group thought to be a growing fraction. The Old Age, Survivors, and Disability program covers those meeting certain criteria based on prior contributions to Social Security, and Supplemental Security Income covers additional recipients, almost all disabled. Some receive benefits from both programs.

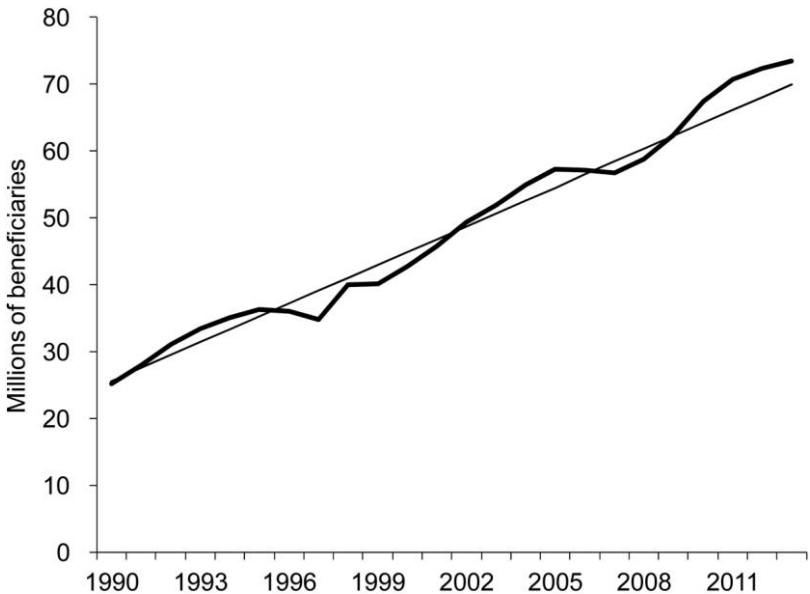
Figure 20 shows the number of recipients of benefits from the two programs, without double counting. The data also exclude people age 65 and over. The straight line shows the trend, fitted to the years 1996 through 2007. The recipient count tracks the trend quite closely until the crisis, and then jumps upward. There is no sign of a return toward the trend line in recent years as the labor market has approached normal conditions.

A full analysis of the role of disability benefits in the postcrisis years would encounter the challenging issue of what fraction of the beneficiaries would be in the labor force but for the benefit programs. An upper-bound calculation of the role is available on the hypothesis that all of the added recipients would have been in the labor force. The gap between the trend line and the actual recipient count in 2013 was

770,000 people, which was 0.4% of the population age 18 through 64. This amount is a potentially important fraction of the 1.9 percentage points of the postcrisis shortfall of labor-force participation calculated earlier in this section.

*F. Other Safety-Net Benefits*

Two other components of the US social safety net are large enough to be candidates for effects on participation. First is Medicaid, which provides medical care mainly to families with children. Figure 21 shows the number of people receiving Medicaid benefits in the standard format of this paper, with a trend fitted to data from 1990 through 2007, projected to 2013. Beneficiaries are on a steep upward trajectory, but the bulge in the postcrisis years appears to be in line with those that occurred after the two previous recessions. Note that the bulge appeared to shrink in 2012 and 2013—as the labor market recovered, beneficiaries reverted toward the previous growth path. It seems unlikely that anything like a significant permanent shift in the path occurred as a result of the crisis.



**Fig. 21.** Medicaid recipients

Source: <http://cms.gov/Research-Statistics-Data-and-Systems/Statistics-Trends-and-Reports/MedicareMedicaidStatSupp/2011.html>, table 13.4.

The other major program is food stamps, now called SNAP. This program pays a large number of families fairly small benefits, averaging \$281 per month in 2011. Figure 22 shows the number of beneficiaries, again in the standard format (from <http://fns.usda.gov/pd/snapsummary.htm>). Growth in beneficiaries was zero during the precrisis period from 1990 through 2007. In 2013, 22 million more people received food stamps than would have received them based on the pre-crisis level. In 2011, with 44.1 million beneficiaries, 20.8 million households received benefits, so the average household had just over two members; 10.1 million beneficiaries were single. Among the 20.4 million beneficiaries age 18 through 59, 6.4 million faced work requirements, 5.7 million were employed, and 5.8 million were looking for work, for an unemployment rate of 50.1% and a labor-force participation rate of 55.9%.

The rules of the food stamp program discourage work among those electing to enroll and, on the other hand, discourage enrollment in the program for those with any significant earning power. Eligibility currently requires that gross monthly income not exceed \$1,681 per month for the typical household of one adult and one child (see <http://fns.usda>

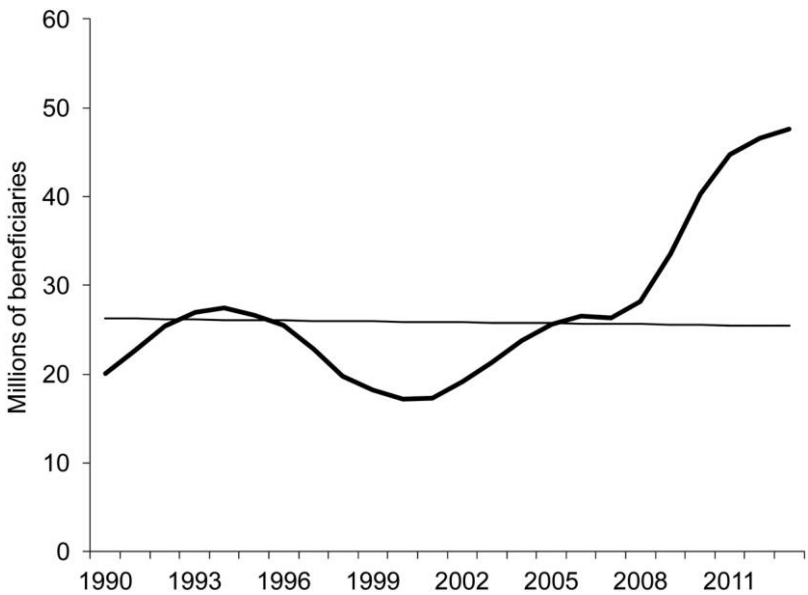


Fig. 22. Beneficiaries receiving food stamps

Source: <http://fns.usda.gov/pd/snapsummary.htm>.



.gov/snap/eligibility). Earnings reduce benefits at a tax rate of 30%. The earnings level sufficient to reduce benefits to zero, for a household with no other source of reportable gross income, is  $\$281/0.30 = \$938$  per month, about half a month's pay at \$10 per hour. Actual average earned income was \$312 per month in 2011, four days of work at \$10 per hour (see Strayer, Eslami, and Leftin 2012).

Under the assumption that the age mix of food stamp beneficiaries was the same in 2013 as in 2011, the increase in food stamp beneficiaries in the age group of potential labor-force participation was 10.3 million. Of these, 6.4 million were women and 3.9 million were men. Food stamps may be part of the explanation for the higher shortfall in participation among women compared to men, shown earlier in table 4. The 10.3 million increment was 4.2% of the labor force aged 16 and higher.

The expansion of food stamps resulted from some crisis-related extensions of eligibility. Mulligan (2012b) describes these in detail. These effectively removed the asset-conditioning of benefits and suspended work requirements. Higher job-finding frictions made food stamps more attractive as well. Dependence on food stamps seems to have substantial inertia, because the beneficiary population has continued to rise despite the partial return to normal conditions in the labor market.

G. *Conclusions about the Decline in Participation*

Table 7 pulls together the results of the analysis of labor-force participation. The starting point is the decline relative to the trend of 3.0% of the population, shown in figure 15. The same figure also shows the sex-age mix effect of 1.1 percentage points. Table 6 describes the 0.5 percentage point effect of increases in marginal and discouraged individuals, who appear likely to find jobs or enter unemployment even though the CPS classifies them as out of the labor force. Figure 20 and its explanation in the text suggest that rising dependence on Social Security disability

**Table 7**  
Summary of Sources of Decline in the Labor-Force Participation Rate, Percentage Points of Population

Total decline in participation relative to trend	3.0
Sex-age mix effect	1.1
Marginal and discouraged individuals	0.5
Increase in disability benefit recipients over trend	0.4
Residual (rising primary wages, rising tax rates)	1.0
Sum of components	3.0

benefits may account for as much as 0.4 percentage points of the decline in labor-force participation. Rising earnings of primary family earners may result in lower participation of other family members. A modest increase in implicit taxes from food stamps could cause important declines in participation. The last two, along with other influences, may explain the residual of 1.0 percentage points of participation decline.

V. Concluding Remarks

Table 8 summarizes the findings of the paper. There is no reason to expect that the cumulative shortfall in productivity growth of 3.4 percentage points of output could be reversed by a sudden increase in product demand. That shortfall seems to be the result of a period of reduced innovation, possibly the result of the crisis. The level of technology is a state variable, and thus not moveable by immediate policy. These statements are not intended as a forecast about productivity growth, however. Productivity forecasts have had no success historically. Productivity growth is a noisy process. Whether the return to a normal economy will result in a catchup in productivity growth in the longer term is an unsettled question of growth economics.

The conclusions for the capital stock are the most focused in the paper. It is unambiguous that the capital stock is an important state variable of the economy. It is responsible for the largest part of the output shortfall, 5.0 percentage points. It cannot respond immediately to a boost to product demand, but a boost would probably trigger an accelerator response that would close some part of the shortfall. In the longer run, the strong mean reversion in the historical capital/output ratio should work to close the entire gap.

Employment was held back in the postcrisis period by high unemployment, which can be seen as a reduction in labor supply. Unemployment dropped slowly to 1.3 percentage points above normal in 2013,

Table 8  
Effects of Boost to Product Demand

Component	Contribution to Shortfall	Immediately	Within a Few Years	Ultimately
Productivity	3.5	No	No	Possibly
Capital	3.9	No	A little	Yes
Unemployment	2.2	Partly	Mostly	Yes
Participation	2.4	Partly	Partly	Partly

contributing 0.9 percentage points to the shortfall in output in that year. The return to normal has been slower than in previous postrecession episodes because the crisis shifted the composition of job seekers toward those with low job-finding rates and low exit rates from unemployment. An increase in product demand would accelerate the remaining move back to normal. Mean reversion of unemployment is a well-established feature of the US economy and there seems little reason to think that the crisis would affect the unemployment rate in any highly persistent way.

Labor-force participation fell substantially after the crisis, contributing 2.5 percentage points to the shortfall in output. The decline showed no sign of reverting as of 2013. Part is demographic and will stabilize, and part reflects low job-finding rates, which should return to normal slowly. But an important part may be related to the large growth in beneficiaries of disability and food stamp programs. Bulges in their enrollments appear to be highly persistent. Both programs place high taxes on earnings and so discourage labor-force participation among beneficiaries. The bulge in program dependence is a state variable arguably resulting from the crisis that may impede output and employment growth for some years into the future.

## Appendix

### Calculations in Table 1

The calculations embody the basic identity:

$$\text{Output growth} = \text{productivity growth} + \text{capital contribution} + \text{labor contribution.}$$

In turn,

$$\text{capital contribution} = \text{capital share} \times \text{change in log per capita input}$$

and

$$\text{labor contribution} = \text{labor share} \times \text{change in log labor input.}$$

Finally,

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Change in log labor input} &= \text{change in log population} \\ &+ \text{change in log participation rate} + \text{change in log employment rate} \\ &+ \text{change in log hours per week} + \text{change in log labor quality} \\ &+ \text{change in log of business fraction of labor input.} \end{aligned}$$

I do these calculations first for a counterfactual situation where the growth rates are equal to precrisis trends and second for the actual experience. The table shows the differences between the two calculations, interpreted as the postcrisis shortfall. I use the actual shares for the counterfactual calculations. Data sources and details of the calculations appear in a spreadsheet in the back-up materials for the paper ([stanford.edu/~rehall](http://stanford.edu/~rehall)).

The unemployment rate in 2007, at 4.6%, was 1.2 percentage points below the value I use as normal, 5.8% (the average from 1948 through 2013). The calculations in the table treat the counterfactual unemployment rates in 2010 and 2013 as 4.6%, although unemployment is mean-reverting to its normal level.

## Related Research

### *The Congressional Budget Office's Explanation of Changes in Its Calculation of Potential Output*

Congressional Budget Office (2014) describes the agency's updates of its estimates of potential output since 2007. Although the focus of the study is on all changes, the document gives some indications of the CBO's views about the effect of the crisis on potential output. In 2007, the last year of the estimate was 2017. As a result of all changes, the CBO's 2014 estimate of potential GDP in 2017, adjusted for intervening changes in the NIPAs, is 7.3% below its estimate for the same year, made in 2007. The CBO breaks down the 7.3% into four categories, of which two, *recession and weak recovery* and *reassessment of trends* account for the bulk, 1.8 and 4.8 percentage points, respectively. The CBO explains that severe recessions following financial crises "dampen investment, raise the rate and average duration of unemployment, and reduce the number of hours that people work," and thus cut potential output. The CBO concludes that the unemployment rate will be 0.5 percentage points higher than normal and the labor-force participation rate 0.4 percentage points lower than normal in 2017 because of lingering effects of the crisis in the labor market. The effect on potential output is 0.7 percentage points. The estimated reduction in 2017 potential output from lost investment on account of the crisis and recession is 0.6% and the reduction from lost productivity growth (taken to be a permanent effect) is 0.5 percentage points.

All of these effects of the crisis calculated for 2017 are smaller—

especially the effect of lost investment—than those in this paper, in table 1, for 2013. The combined loss of output from investment, labor-force participation, and TFP is 10.9 percentage points. Though the effects of investment and participation will decline somewhat over four years, the total in this paper is obviously much larger than the CBO estimates.

The second major category in the CBO study is reassessment of trends, which accounts for 4.8 percentage points of decline in 2017 potential output. The CBO explains “although already in progress before the business cycle peaked in 2007, did not become apparent until after that peak had been identified.” With the NBER’s determination of a peak at the end of 2007 and other changes in the CBOs trend-measurement techniques, the rapid growth of the 1990s became less influential and the slower growth from 2000 through 2007 correspondingly more influential in later CBO projections. The change in the CBO’s projections of total labor input to the business sector accounted for a decline of 3.0 percentage points in 2017 potential output. Lower investment and lower TFP growth each accounted for 0.7 percentage points of decline in 2017 potential output.

By far the most important difference between the CBOs analysis and mine is the tiny role the CBO assigns to the shortfall in capital, which I find accounts for 5.0 percentage points of output shortfall in 2013 while the CBO assigns it 1.3 percentage points in 2016. The CBO splits this into 0.6 percentage points from the crisis and 0.7 points from their reassessment of trends. For other components of the shortfall, the CBO’s estimates are roughly in agreement with mine. For TFP, the CBO has a total effect of 1.2 percentage points compared to my 3.4 points, but I do not take much of a stand on how much of the 3.4 point shortfall resulted from the crisis. For labor input, the CBO assigns 0.7 percentage points to the crisis, mostly in reduced labor-force participation, but 3.0 percentage points to a declining trend that began before the crisis. The total is comparable to my findings, but I assign somewhat more to the crisis.

### *Unemployment*

Ravn and Sterk (2012) develop a model with two types of unemployment and a changing mix depending on driving forces. In normal times, much of the flow into unemployment comprises workers whose terminations lead to easy placement in new jobs, but, following a major uncertainty shock, the mix shifts toward those who are much harder

to place. These shocks result in large increases in unemployment. The model accounts for the declining measured matching efficiency.

### *Labor-Force Participation*

Erceg and Levin (2013) conclude that the shortfall of labor-force participation from its precrisis trend was about two percentage points, in line with the findings here. They measure the trend as the BLS's forecast made in November 2007. They make the case that the shortfall was the result of a slack labor market. They use a regression of state-level changes in the labor-force participation rate (LFPR) between 2007 and 2012 on the changes in the unemployment rate between 2007 and 2010. They use the longer span for the LFPR based on evidence that historically the rate has had inertia relative to the unemployment rate. A variety of specifications agree that the coefficient is  $-0.3$  with a standard error of  $0.1$ . Given a 5-percentage point increase in the unemployment rate postcrisis, the coefficient implies a decline in the LFPR of 1.5 percentage points. The authors conclude, "the state-level data indicates that the aggregate decline in prime-age LFPR since 2007 can be *fully* explained by the persistent shortfall in labor demand" (emphasis in original, 15). They do not take a stand on the size of the decline in the trend-adjusted, prime-age LFPR other than calling it "nearly two percentage points" (12).

The standard error of the estimate of five times the coefficient is 0.5 percentage points, so the 95% confidence interval for the part of the decline attributable to rising unemployment is  $[1.5 - 2 \times 0.5, 1.5 + 2 \times 0.5] = [0.5, 2.5]$ , so the evidence is consistent with a rather smaller role of unemployment and with a role so large as to overexplain the decline in the LFPR.

In table 7, the line for marginal and discouraged individuals, at 0.5 percentage points of reduction in the LFPR, is explicitly a result of a slack labor market. Some part of the last line, the residual, may also be a result of slack. Thus the results in this paper are within the confidence interval, but probably near its lower boundary and therefore inconsistent the Erceg and Levin's estimate at a lower confidence level.

The authors also estimate that the rise of Social Security disability dependence above its trend is 0.4 percentage points, the same as in table 7.

With respect to the prime-age individuals whom the authors believe withdrew from the labor market for reasons other than disability, the authors write, "Evidently, the remainder represents roughly a million

individuals who have given up searching for a job and instead are engaged in other activities such as child care, home renovation projects, etc.” (19). I believe this statement is mistaken for two reasons. First, there is evidence that the rise in nonparticipation has added mostly to the groups who are engaging in job search at a low level, but will ultimately find jobs or will begin the search fairly soon. Their number is swollen by low current success rates for search. Second, the evidence on time use shows little increase in home production in slack labor markets—leisure activities tend to absorb the extra time.

Autor (2011) is a recent and complete discussion of Social Security disability and the reasons for the expansion of dependence relative to the health of the labor force. Hanel (2012) finds substantial reductions in labor supply from the implicit taxation of earnings in the German disability program.

Congressional Budget Office (2012) is an extensive discussion of the economics of food stamps, including forecasts of gradually declining dependence after 2012. Ganong and Liebman (2013) decompose the recent growth of food stamp beneficiaries into a large component associated with slack labor market and a smaller component associated with expanded eligibility.

Baicker et al. (2013) rule out the possibility that access to Medicaid depresses labor-force participation by more than a small amount and show that zero effect is consistent with the results of a random-assignment experiment.

Mulligan (2012a, figure 2), describes his calculations of eligibility for three major safety net programs: during the period from 2007 through 2011, he finds no change in eligibility standards for Medicaid and large extensions for food stamps and UI benefits.

Bitler and Hoynes (2013) present evidence that the expansion of safety net dependence after 2007 was comparable to expansions in previous slumps, given adjustments for the magnitudes of the slumps.

Mueller, Rothstein, and von Wachter (2013) study the relation between UI benefits and Social Security disability claims. They reject the possibility that individuals move in meaningful numbers from UI to disability programs when UI benefits expire.

Hotchkiss, Pitts, and Rios-Avila (2012) find nonwork activities identified as “school” and “other” grew during the period of decline in labor-force participation. They conclude that these are probably temporary and, as they return to normal, participation will rise.

Elsby, Hobijn, and Sahin (2013) show the importance of studying the

gross flows of individuals among employment, search, and out of labor force, in understanding fluctuations in participation. They present evidence of the heterogeneity of those classified as out of the labor force—the distribution of the job-finding hazard ranges from zero to levels similar to those classified as unemployed. Krusell et al. (2012) construct a model with explicit treatment of the flows among the three activities.

## Endnotes

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