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‘The Global Financial Crisis and Mortgage Fraud – The Untold Story’

Dr. Nicholas Ryder
Professor in Financial Crime
Department of Law
Faculty of Business and Law
University of the West of England
Bristol

Introduction

The origins of the financial crisis can be traced to the United States (US) subprime mortgage sector. The subprime mortgage sector is supported by lenders providing subprime loans.¹ These types of mortgages place the debtor under severe pressure to repay the loan, due to irresponsible lending or even predatory lending practices. Subprime loans can be described as “non-traditional, higher risk loans that frequently carry above market interest rates and … in some cases, the loans were made with less documentation and credit verification than traditional mortgages.”² It has been argued that financial crisis was ‘caused by the creeping levels of mortgage defaults in the subprime market in the US’.³ The losses incurred as a result of the collapse of the subprime mortgage sector were staggering. For example, according to the International Monetary Fund the total losses associated with subprime lending in 2008

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initially totalled $945m.\(^4\) The Wall Street Journal reported that the total losses from the financial crisis were $15tn.\(^5\) The bursting of the subprime mortgage sector resulted in numerous corporate insolvencies and significant losses for both investors and banks.\(^6\) In 2010, it was estimated that losses attributed to banks from the financial crisis amounted to $2.28bn.\(^7\) It has been suggested that the blame for the subprime crisis is associated with the actions of the Federal Reserve. For example, it has been suggested by one commentator, Doise that the actions of the Federal Reserve resulted in the determined and uncompromising sale of loans.\(^8\) Conversely, it has been suggested that debtors are to blame for the subprime lending by entering into financial agreements that they were unable to repay. The subprime mortgage sector collapsed when property prices began to decrease and the number of foreclosures began to increase.\(^9\) This was preceded by a period of economic growth when the average property price doubled, at a rate higher than the wages of many householders.\(^10\) These lending practices of subprime mortgage providers contributed to record levels of defaults, repossessions and an increase in consumer debt. Research suggests that the levels of household debt from mortgages in the US increased over a 25 year period from 1982. This resulted in a significant increase in levels of personal debt, and mortgage defaults, housing repossessions and reduction in house prices. Nguyen and Pontell stated that ‘as the crisis unfolds, a significant number of families have lost their homes or are financially trapped in


their current mortgages and simply waiting for their homes to be taken from them’. The increase in the number of repossessions and mortgage defaults has resulted in an increase in mortgage fraud.

**Mortgage Fraud**

Mortgage fraud is the most prominent white collar crime associated with subprime lending and the financial crisis. The link between white collar crime and subprime loans was identified by Nguyen and Pontell who stated that ‘investigations have found that the growth of nonprime lending attracted a great deal of fraud’. Furthermore, Harrell took the view that ‘no discussion of the housing boom of 1993–2006 and the great credit contraction that has followed would be complete without a discussion of mortgage fraud’. Dilley and Weller noted that ‘the origins of the credit crunch lie with the sub-prime lending and the ensuing house price bubble in the US. Mortgage fraud – by borrowers, brokers and appraisers – was a key contributor.’ Similarly, the FBI stated that during the subprime mortgage crisis ‘mortgage fraud perpetrators … [took] advantage of industry personnel attempting to generate loans to maintain current standards of living’. Therefore, the FBI concluded that ‘subprime mortgage issues remain a key factor in influencing mortgage fraud directly and indirectly’. According to McCann, ‘mortgage fraud perpetrated by these unregulated private mortgage brokers may have contributed to the instability and loss in the residential lending

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12 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
market that contributed to the mortgage crisis’. It is very interesting to note that the threat posed by mortgage fraud was recognised by the FBI in 2004, when it stated ‘if fraudulent practices become systemic within the mortgage industry and mortgage fraud is allowed to become unrestrained, it will ultimately place financial institutions at risk and have adverse effects on the stock market’. Furthermore, the FBI warned that ‘it [mortgage fraud] has the potential to be an epidemic’. Black stated that despite this blunt warning from the FBI, ‘no one in the industry, including regulators, ranks of investors or creditors, or law enforcement personnel took effective action against the epidemic’.

Mortgage fraud has been defined by the FBI as ‘the intentional misstatement, misrepresentation, or omission by an applicant or other interested parties, relied on by a lender or underwriter to provide funding for, to purchase, or to insure a mortgage loan’. It also includes providing misleading information when making a mortgage application. There are traditionally two types of mortgage fraud – fraud for property and fraud for profit, which can be divided into different subcategories. For example, this includes misrepresentation, occupancy fraud, appraisal fraud, identity theft, straw purchasing and flipping. Common mortgage fraud schemes include property flipping, straw buyers and

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24 Ibid.
equity skimming. Other mortgage fraud systems include builder bailout, buy and bail, chunking, double selling, fictitious loan, phantom sale, reverse mortgage fraud and short sale fraud. The FBI noted that other types of mortgage fraud scams ‘involve material misstatement, misrepresentation, or omission relating to a real estate transaction which is relied on by one or more parties to the transaction’. They added that these schemes include ‘foreclosure rescue schemes, loan modification schemes, illegal property flipping, builder bailout/condo conversions, equity skimming, silent second, home equity conversion mortgage, commercial real estate loans and air loans’.

The extent of mortgage fraud is difficult, if not impossible, to determine. For example, the FBI estimated that the extent of mortgage fraud in 2006 was $4.2bn. In 2007 it described mortgage fraud as ‘an escalating problem’, yet the total amount of mortgage fraud related losses dropped to $813m. Nonetheless, in 2008 the reported losses from mortgage fraud increased by 83.4 per cent to $1.4bn. In its 2009 Mortgage Fraud Report, the FBI cited figures from CoreLogic, which estimated that the total amount of losses related to mortgage fraud had increased to $14bn. CoreLogic estimated that the extent of mortgage fraud in 2011 was $12bn. In its 2012 mortgage fraud report CoreLogic projected that the level of

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28 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
34 CoreLogic 2011 Mortgage fraud trends report (CoreLogic: Irvine, 2011) at 1.
mortgage fraud had increased to $13bn.\textsuperscript{35} These statistical data are supported by research conducted by the Mortgage Asset Research Institute, which advised that ‘mortgage fraud is more prevalent now than in the heyday of the origination boom and … it will continue to rise’.\textsuperscript{36}

The link between mortgage fraud and the financial crisis is clearly illustrated by the significant increase in the number of related SARs submitted to FinCEN. For example, between 1996 and 2006 FinCEN received 82,851 mortgage fraud related SARs.\textsuperscript{37} During this period the number of suspected instances of mortgage fraud reported to FinCEN increased by approximately 1,400 per cent.\textsuperscript{38} Furthermore, in 2008 FinCEN stated that between 2006 and 2007 it received 37,313 mortgage fraud SARs.\textsuperscript{39} This figure represented 45 per cent of the total mortgage fraud related reports it received between 1996 and 2006. In 2010 the number of mortgage fraud related SARs received by FinCEN numbered 70,472.\textsuperscript{40} The number of SARs increased significantly to 92,028 in 2011.\textsuperscript{41} Lexis Nexis reported that in 2011 FinCEN received 93,508 mortgage fraud related SARs from 2010, an increase of approximately 33 per cent.\textsuperscript{42} This position was succinctly summarised by Smith, who concluded: ‘the past decade has witnessed an explosion of mortgage fraud, with reports to the federal government of suspected criminal behaviour rising by a magnitude of over eighteen times from 2000 to

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{35} Ibid.
\bibitem{42} Lexis Nexis \textit{The Lexis Nexis 14th annual mortgage fraud report} (Lexis Nexis: London, 2012) at 3.
\end{thebibliography}
However, it has been argued that the figures from FinCEN represent only a small percentage of the true extent of mortgage fraud. For example, Black took the view that ‘the total SARs figure is only a faint indication of the true incidence of mortgage fraud’.

It is also interesting to note that ‘mortgage fraud, far from abating, has only expanded since the foreclosure crisis began’. Further evidence of the link between mortgage fraud and the financial crisis is also illustrated by an increase in the investigative and enforcement activities of the FBI. For example, since the start of the financial crisis we have witnessed a 400 per cent increase in the number of mortgage fraud investigations undertaken by the FBI.

Furthermore, in response to the increase in mortgage fraud the FBI has established 84 mortgage fraud task forces; there have been approximately 2,000 investigations, over 1,000 indictments and over 1,100 convictions. Moye summarised the overall impact of mortgage fraud from a law enforcement perspective:

“From 2007 through 2010, the number of federal mortgage fraud cases increased from 1,200 to over 3,000. Almost 70 per cent of those fraud cases involved losses exceeding $1m. In June 2010, the Department of Justice announced the results of Operation Stolen Dreams, the largest mortgage fraud sweep in history. The sweep lasted three and a half months, involved 1,517 defendants, 863 indictments, 525 arrests, and involved over $3.05bn in losses. Finally, the sweep resulted in over 191 civil enforcement actions and $196m in recoveries”.

Conclusion

The association between the 2008 Global Financial Crisis and white collar crime continues to gather momentum. This article has attempted to demonstrate that mortgage fraud in

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46 Heroy, J. ‘Other people’s money: how a time-gap in credit reporting may lead to fraud’ (2008) North Carolina Banking Institute, 12, 321–351, at 322.
particular, played a key role in the most recent financial crisis and the continued enforcement activities by the Federal Bureau of Investigation clearly illustrate this point.