The Federal Reserve Board reported Sept. 25 that total household net worth reached $74.8 trillion in current dollars at the end of the second quarter of 2013. Household wealth has increased 35 percent from its recessionary nadir at the end of the first quarter of 2009 and now stands 8.4 percent higher than its pre-recession peak of $69.0 trillion at the end of the third quarter of 2007 (Figure 1).

When adjusted for inflation and growth in the number of households, however, average real net worth has recovered only 76 percent of the loss incurred between 2007 and 2009. The slow recovery of wealth is due primarily to housing, which only began to rise in value at the beginning of 2012. The faster recovery of financial assets mainly has benefited wealthier families, who own most of the economy’s stocks and other financial assets. In this article, we show that the nascent housing recovery appears to reflect rising prices of relatively more expensive houses. This also likely benefits wealthy families more than those who own lower-value houses or are renters.

Housing Recovery Underway

For the sixth consecutive quarter, rising house prices contributed strongly to overall household wealth recovery. The total value of owners’ equity in household real estate (henceforth, homeowners’ equity) reached $9.3 trillion at the end of the second quarter of 2013, up 50.1 percent since the fourth quarter of 2011 and the highest level in more than five years. In dollar terms, the $3.1 trillion increase in homeowners’ equity since the end of 2011 nearly matches the $4.1 trillion increase in households’ stock-market equity shares during the same time period.

Despite the strong recovery to date, housing values and homeowners’ equity remain far below peak levels. After adjusting for inflation and growth in the number of homeowners, average homeowners’ equity at the end of the second quarter of 2013 (about $125,000) was slightly less than the value achieved in the second quarter of 2000, some 13 years ago (Figure 2). Inflation-adjusted per-capita disposable personal income, by way of comparison, increased 16.7 percent during that time. The current average inflation-adjusted value of homeowners’ equity remains 38.3 percent lower than its peak value in early 2006, although that is a significant improvement from the end of 2011, when the value was 58.6 percent lower than peak value.

Uneven Distribution of Housing Wealth Gains

Even more important than inflation and growth adjustments, the distribution of house-price gains—that is, which house prices are increasing faster and which slower—determines how broad the housing-driven wealth recovery will be. One way to gauge how widespread house-price increases have been is to compare two different kinds of house-price indexes: value weighted and equal weighted. Examples of the former are the CoreLogic Home Price Index and the S&P/Case-Shiller Home Price Index. Examples of the latter include a variety of indexes compiled by the Federal Housing Finance Agency (FHFA); we focus on the FHFA’s (continued on Page 2)
The recent recovery in house prices and homeowners’ equity therefore is good news, but much more will be needed for the typical homeowner to recover fully from the deep wealth losses experienced in recent years.

There are two relevant features of the chart for judging the distribution of gains in the nascent housing recovery to date. First, at the trough in late 2011, the equal-weighted FHFA index was noticeably lower than either of the value-weighted indexes, even though they all began at 100 in early 2000. We can infer that, on balance, the net percentage price change between 2000 and 2011 was greater for higher-value homes than for lower-value homes because value-weighted indexes represent higher-value homes’ price movements more closely.

The second important fact is that the value-weighted indexes have increased more sharply since the 2011 trough than the equal-weighted index. In particular, the inflation-adjusted CoreLogic and Case-Shiller indexes have increased by 12.7 and 11.8 percent, respectively, since the end of 2011. During the same period, the inflation-adjusted FHFA index increased by just 8.3 percent. Thus, higher-value homes generally have appreciated faster than lower-value homes.

Putting together these two facts, we conclude that lower-value homes—such as the $100,000 and $200,000 houses in our example—generally fell to a deeper trough in 2011 and subsequently have recovered more slowly than their higher-value counterparts. The equal-weighted FHFA index better represents the experience of the typical homeowner than do either of the value-weighted indexes or the Fed’s estimate of household real-estate values, which essentially is a value-weighted index.
Measures of Household Wealth

Average Inflation-Adjusted Homeowners’ Equity

Inflation-Adjusted National House-Price Indexes

Inflation-Adjusted Equal-Weighted House-Price Indexes

Inflation-Adjusted Equal-Weighted House-Price Indexes

Inflation-Adjusted National House-Price Indexes

Inflation-Adjusted Equal-Weighted House-Price Indexes

SOURCES: Federal Reserve Board, Bureau of Economic Analysis, Census Bureau.

SOURCES: Federal Reserve Board, Bureau of Economic Analysis, Census Bureau.

SOURCES: CoreLogic, Standard & Poor’s, Federal Housing Finance Agency, Bureau of Economic Analysis.


Recent Federal Reserve data show that debt from student loans has climbed from roughly $550 billion in 2007 to about $1 trillion today. In addition to weighing down family balance sheets, recent research shows that these loans may also lead to significant losses of wealth later in life, suppress business startups, postpone family formation and slow economic growth.

Encouragingly, innovative reforms are underway nationwide to make college more affordable, restructure student aid and provide promising alternatives to financing higher education beyond student loans. To provide insight, the Center for Household Financial Stability will host a student-loan forum—“Generation Debt: The Promise, Perils and Future of Student Loans”—on Nov. 18 at the St. Louis Fed. Rohit Chopra of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau will give the keynote speech. The latest research and data on student loans will be presented, and new ideas and programs for financing higher education will be discussed.

The cost to attend is $50 ($15 for students).

To register, visit www.stlouisfed.org/generation_debt.

After the event, materials can be found at www.stlouisfed.org/hfs.

ENDNOTES
1. Financial Accounts of the United States, http://www.federalreserve.gov/releases/z1/. These figures are not adjusted for inflation or population growth. Total homeowners’ equity is the total value of all U.S. household real estate minus all outstanding home-mortgage debt. It constituted 12.4 percent of total household net worth at the end of the second quarter of 2013.
2. All of the house-price indexes discussed here are repeat-sales indexes, which are designed to control for quality differences among individual homes, including size, amenities and location.
3. For details see http://www.corelogic.com/about-us/researchtrends/home-price-index-report.aspx and http://us.spindices.com/index-family/real-estate/sp-case-shiller. In between biennial benchmarkings to Census Bureau data, the Federal Reserve uses quarterly changes in the CoreLogic value-weighted index to estimate the total value of household real estate in its Financial Accounts. This is because the data reported in the Financial Accounts are conceptually similar to value-weighted indexes.
5. Federal Housing Finance Board.