



5 May 2016



SENT TO LSU AGCENTER/LOUISIANA FOREST PRODUCTS DEVELOPMENT CENTER - FOREST SECTOR / FORESTY PRODUCTS INTEREST GROUP

From Al Schuler (USFS-Retired)

To all:

Housing still struggling. Problem for 1st time buyers is rising prices which are rising due primarily to short supply. Builders not building many entry level homes because demand is lacking. Price of existing starter homes is beyond reach of many young people. World economy difficult to gauge - U.S. GDP stuck near 2% while Europe continues to experience problems. China, although slowing down, they are making progress shifting to consumer driven economy ( versus investment driven over past decade). This is good news for exporters of consumer goods to China - not so good for countries exporting resources ( coal, etc.).

Economy is improving, but the pace is slow, and I don't think the pace will pick up anytime soon. U.S. election continues to amaze me. Many Americans not happy with their economic situation nor future outlook, and their displeasure is having big impact on the political races.

The FED meeting results will be announced tomorrow ( April 27) - most analysts don't expect any change this time, but rate increases expected later this year. Of course, this depends on world economy, etc. The good news here is progress China is making in their transition to consumer driven economy.

Spring is here in WV - all is well with the world I guess.

Al

-----  
Richard P. Vlosky, Ph.D.  
*Director, Louisiana Forest Products Development Center*  
*Crosby Land & Resources Endowed Professor of Forest Sector Business Development*  
Room 227, School of Renewable Natural Resources  
Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA 70803  
Phone (office): (225) 578-4527; Fax: (225) 578-4251; Mobile Phone: (225) 223-1931  
Web Site: [www.LFPDC.lsu.edu](http://www.LFPDC.lsu.edu)



**President, Forest Products Society; President-Elect, WoodEMA i.a.**



## Housing comments – April 2016

- *March starts totals were down 8.8% ( to 1.089 million, annual rate) - SF at 764,000, down 9.2% (SAAR) – MF still 30% of total*
- Multi family still the driver – rental prices still increasing – single family sales remain relatively weak and this has big impact on wood product prices.
- Economic issues - slowing world economy( China GDP slowest in past 8 years). China slowdown drives commodity prices lower, while currency devaluations in Europe, Japan, and elsewhere rekindle deflation concerns around the world.
- *Short supply of homes (new and existing) driving prices higher – keeps 1<sup>st</sup> time buyers out of the market ( historically 40 – 45%, but today only 31%)*
- Job market is improving , albeit slowly, wage gains remain weak, and, the real unemployment rate remains high at 10.3%. This equates to about 16 million people who are either unemployed, stopped looking, or working part time because they can't find full time jobs. This “slack” in the job market will keep wage gains modest for some time.
- *Income growth in U.S. is improving in 2016, but latest Census report shows real incomes today about the same as 20 years ago.. This suggests to me that housing will remain sub par for some time – many 1<sup>st</sup> time buyers just can't enter the market.*
- World GDP growth outlook is shaky at best – main problem today is the slowdown in China which has been the major economic engine over the past 8 years. European growth is expected to be relatively weak while back here in USA, growth will probably remain below par ( ~ 2%) for some time.
- *Housing continues to improve, but the pace is agonizingly slow – I don't think this scenario will change much over the rest of 2016!!*

But, here is some good news re: world economy

China is making good progress transitioning  
To a consumer driven economy ( from “smokestack  
Economy – i.e., investment spending).

Good news for world demand for consumer products  
And the right solution to slowing world economy – this will  
Help solve economic growth problems and hopefully  
Get us off our “love affair” with central bank stimulus as  
The panacea to our problems!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

(<http://finance.yahoo.com/news/yum-gm-under-armour-starbucks-china-consumer-growth-213534928.html> )

China's economy shifting from infrastructure investments and exports (smokestack industries) To domestic demand driven economy (services and consumers) – this will take time – but there is good news here. E.g., Qtr1 2016 GDP was 6.7%, slowest in 7 years, however, domestic consumption was up substantially – this is good news for world demand for many products

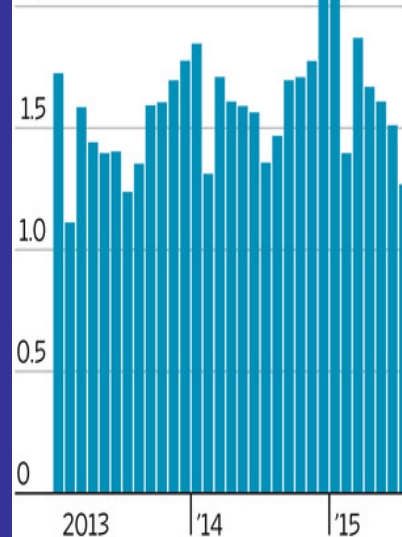
## Looking to the Consumer

China's government sees big hopes in unlocking the buying power of its population, and some indicators of consumerism have bucked economic weakness.

### Passenger-car sales,

in vehicles

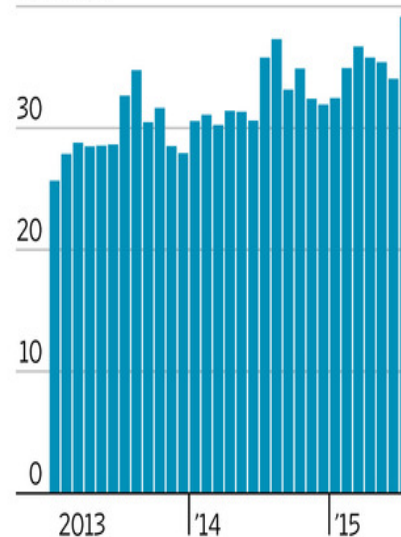
2.0 million



### Airline traffic,

in passengers

40 million



### Electricity consumption,

Change from a year earlier

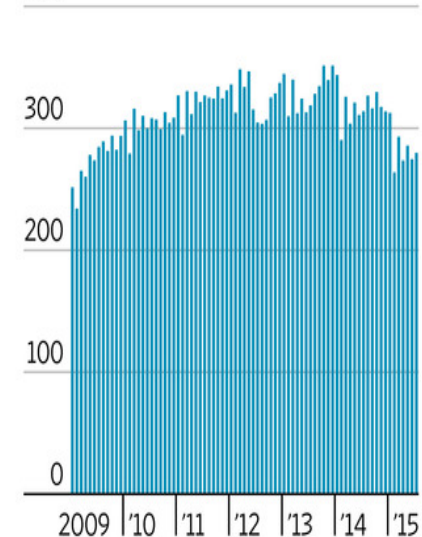
60%



### Railway freight traffic,

in millions of metric tons

400



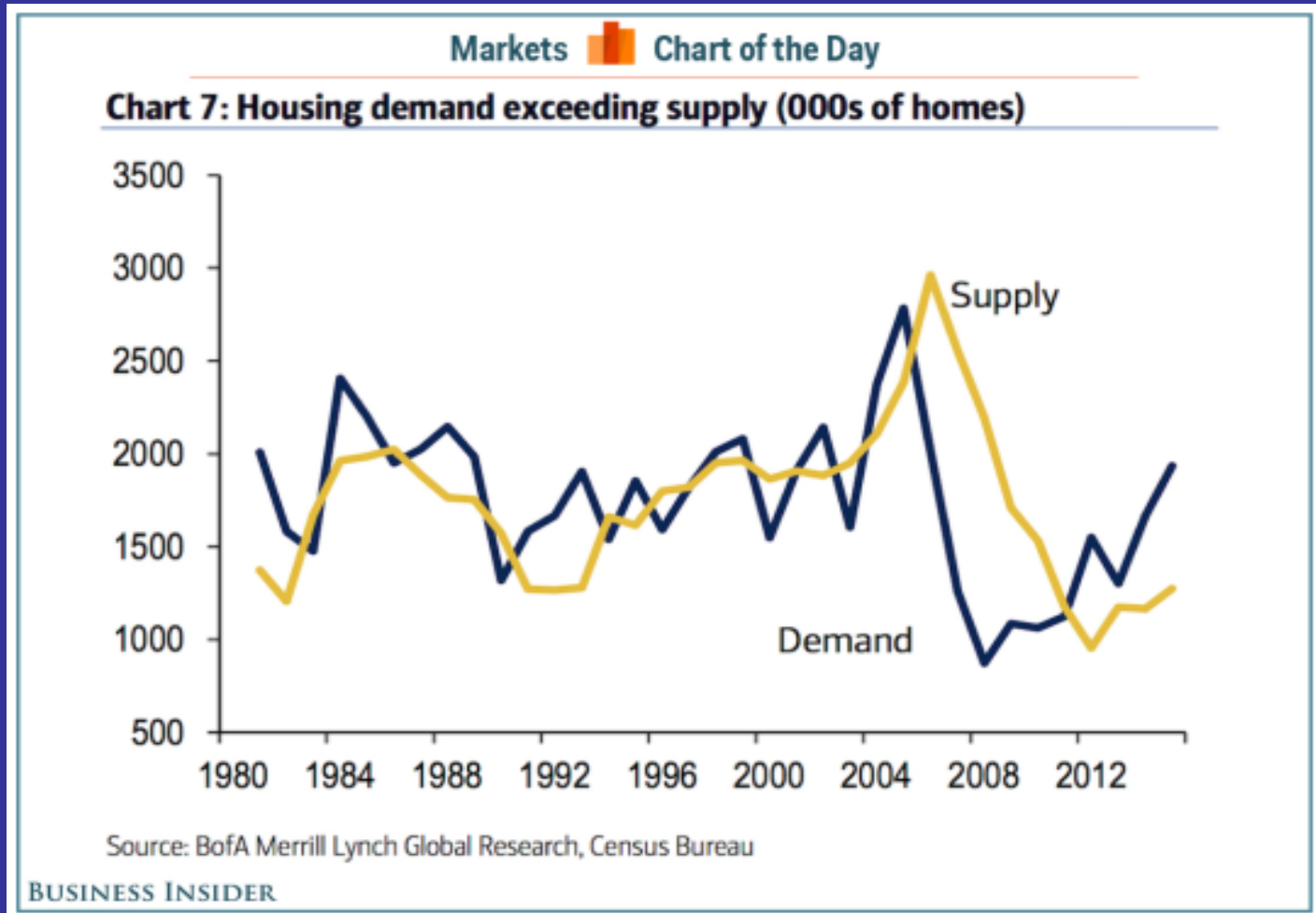
Sources: China Association of Automobile Manufacturers (car sales); Civil Aviation Administration of China (airline traffic); China Electricity Council; China Railway Corporation

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Good article on housing – housing to remain out of reach for many 1<sup>st</sup> time buyers due mainly to short supply ( drives up prices); tight Credit restrictions; low paying jobs; ..... New home supply a bigger problem As builders avoid building entry level homes. Higher prices and low wages Forcing people to the rental market – could continue for some time!!!!!!

( <http://finance.yahoo.com/news/next-housing-crisis-152505885.html> )

Tight supply drives up prices – existing homes  
At 4.4 months supply – normal supply is 6 months



The Fed raised interest rates – finally - in December. And, they said Further increases will probably be gradual in 2016 and beyond. **However, Current problems with falling oil prices and shaky world economy, I expect the FED will delay any further rate hikes for several months at least. Plus, there is no sign of inflation, anywhere, except equity markets.**

Here are some thoughts:

The dollar will remain relatively strong, and commodity Prices remain weak as most are priced in US\$. World demand is Weak - China is the main problem - expected to worsen. Europe remains weak, And the commodity currency countries ( e.g., Canada, Australia, ..) will Face continuing economic headwinds. As far as housing goes, modestly higher Rates will not hurt housing too much. As we have discussed many times before, income and job growth is the key to any substantial housing recovery. On that score, income growth is non existent ( real \$) for past 25 years, and The job market still has problems. 30% of jobs created in past 8 years Have been part time with few if any benefits. Furthermore, credit remains Tough for many potential 1<sup>st</sup> time buyers. **Problem today is lack of Confidence by our business leaders – e.g., spending on stock buybacks has Increased 200% since 2009 - i.e., they are not investing for the future!!!**

The global economy is losing steam ( WSJ Jan 20, J. Hilsenrath) – monetary Policy in USA, Europe, ... has “reached its limits”. Debt is out of control here in USA and elsewhere. We’ve had credit driven growth ( via central banks) for The past 8 years with questionable success. Now, we have huge debts that Will eventually have to be paid off. **Paying it off will squeeze other programs Like defense, Medicare/Medicaid, social security, infrastructure spending, Education, ....**

Long term issues like aging populations and slower productivity growth mean weak GDP growth and lower standard of living in many parts of the world. Solutions include tax reform, infrastructure investment, R&D, education reform. **We desperately need innovation and more risk taking to create products and Services desired by the marketplace. As mentioned previously, companies are Not investing – they are buying back stock and merging – good strategies in Short term, but basically admitting long term outlook is cloudy with limited Opportunity for growth.**

**Going to be tough for housing to improve much in today’s Economic environment!!!!!! That means wood product Prices will remain subdued.**



## **A few comments re: recent terrorism**

The current administration has misjudged ISIS/ISIL/whatever, from the beginning. If this is the “JV team”, I would hate to see the “Varsity team”!!!!  
Latest attacks in Paris, Africa, California, Pakistan, ..... clearly demonstrate That the world’s response is not working. They are not being “contained” as The current administration suggests. Whether we like it or not, the world needs A “world policeman” and the only country capable of filling that role is USA.

I’m tired of war as are most Americans, but now is not the time to become an Isolationist. If we continue down that path, terrorism will only increase.

We need leadership today more than ever. A strong leader gives people Confidence in the future – we don’t have that today in America ( and other Parts of the world for that matter). Confidence is a must if we are going to invest in our future – without confidence, we drift as a country and As a people.

**What has this got to do with housing you ask? If we continue the current course, World economic growth will continue to weaken, U.S. growth will barely reach 2%, And U.S. housing will remain below trend. And, wood prices will continue to Languish.**

Main problem with U.S. economy (and world) is weak Demand and Low interest rates are not the answer-

Fed doesn't know what to do - current crop of politicians ( Democrats and Republicans) very Disappointing - hopefully, someone will emerge from the Political debates with credible ideas and the ability to Communicate a strategy for addressing serious problems Facing our country ( e.g., tax reform; infrastructure investments; fix the Education system - K - 12; regulatory reform; national debt; health care remains A confusing mess, and it is the most expensive in the world...). Otherwise, we're in for extended period ( decades) of Weak Economic growth, and that means weak housing, weak job creation, lower standard of living, and sad sack wood prices.

Productivity is a problem for U.S. economy ( not withstanding measurement problems) - and jobs miss match - there are jobs out there, but many people lack The necessary skill set. Solution - - education, tax reform, and infrastructure Investment. Difficult to solve these problems due to student Debt issues and government /national debt approaching 20 trillion \$. Many analysts expect U.S. economy to remain weak with GDP Averaging about 2% over next decade.

Future world GDP growth – studies in wsj and elsewhere suggest  
That demographic shifts will slow growth – main reason is slower population growth  
Rates in many parts of the world – USA; Europe; Russia; China; ....

**Bottom line – slower world demand growth and this can't be fixed very easily .**

**We need to get more**  
**creative with “supply side” issues. E.g.,**  
**Innovation and investment to create new/better products –**  
**this requires tax reform, less regulation, less government,**

.....

See Greg Ip, WSJ “demographic destiny” WSJ 2050

(<http://www.wsj.com/articles/how-demographics-rule-the-global-economy-1448203724?mod=ST1> )

## Rental demand versus single family housing ---

Rental demand will continue to

Increase for some time – a recent study by the Urban Institute suggests it may continue for another decade or two

( <http://www.wsj.com/articles/new-housing-crisis-looms-as-fewer-renters-can-afford-to-own-1433698639> )

Why - - demographics; growing minority population; student debt; weak income growth; .... E.g., Minorities ( nonwhite) will make up 75% of net household growth over the next 10 years, and 85% during 2020- 2030. They are less likely to own homes ( lower incomes is main reason) so home ownership continues to fall toward 60% by 2030. During this time, rental demand will increase dramatically. Although this is just one study, it provides food for thought. One potential question with the study, however, is other studies show that although immigrants, for example, rent initially, but, over time they purchase homes at a rate equal to or higher than native born Americans. Why – people come to the U.S. to improve quality of life, and for most, this means homeownership. This suggests that the U.S. has to find solutions to immigration issues like “illegal immigrants” while encouraging legal immigration. This country was founded by immigrants seeking a better life, and they are key to our future. **And, incomes for all Minorities has to improve if home ownership is to return to “good old days”**

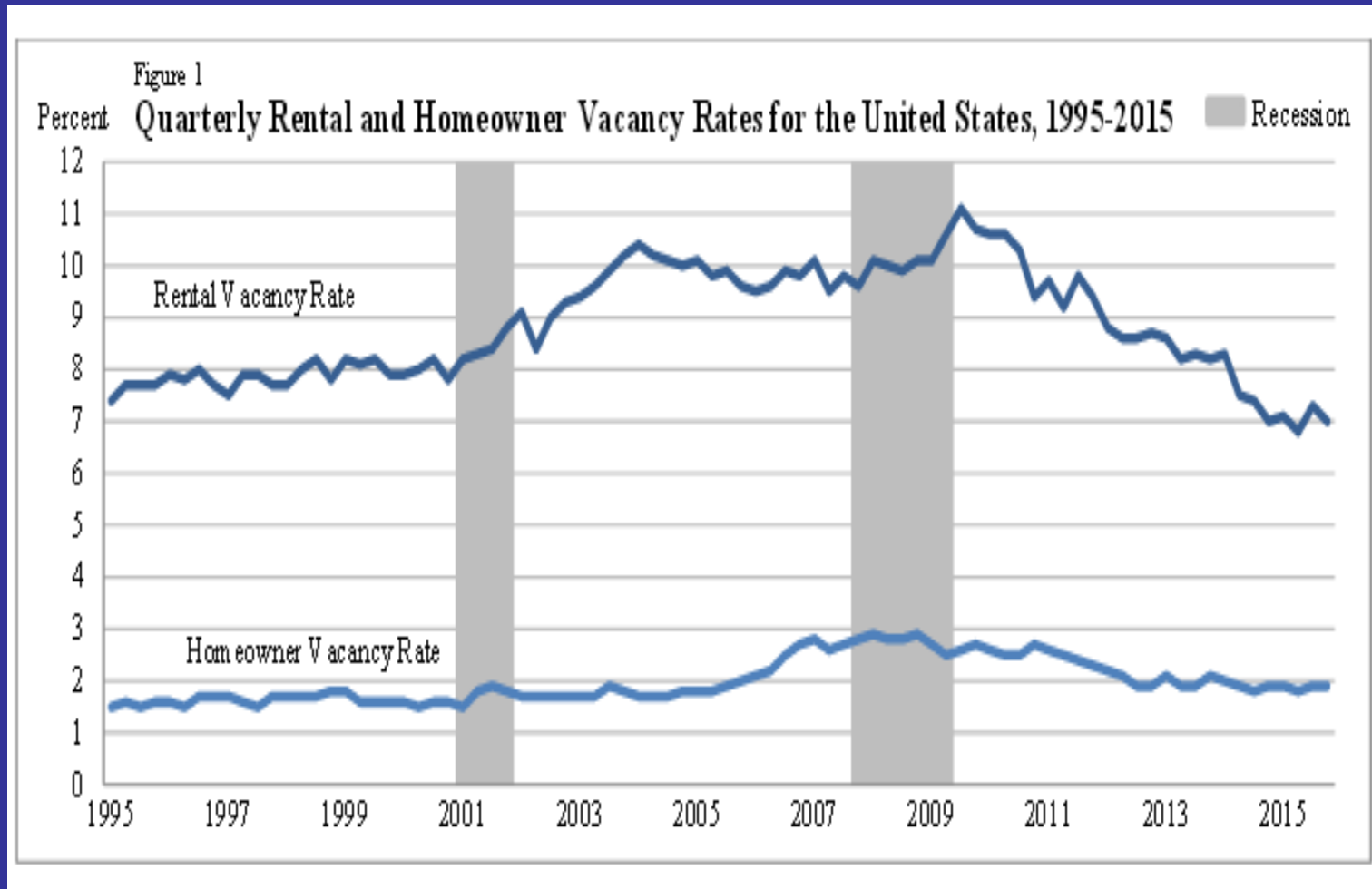
( [http://www.engineeredwood.org/Data/sites/3/documents/EngWoodJournal/EWJ\\_Spring2010.pdf](http://www.engineeredwood.org/Data/sites/3/documents/EngWoodJournal/EWJ_Spring2010.pdf) )

Anyway, this has potential implications for home ownership; single family construction; and demand for wood products – lots of variables and scenarios.

# Rental vacancy rates lowest in 20 years

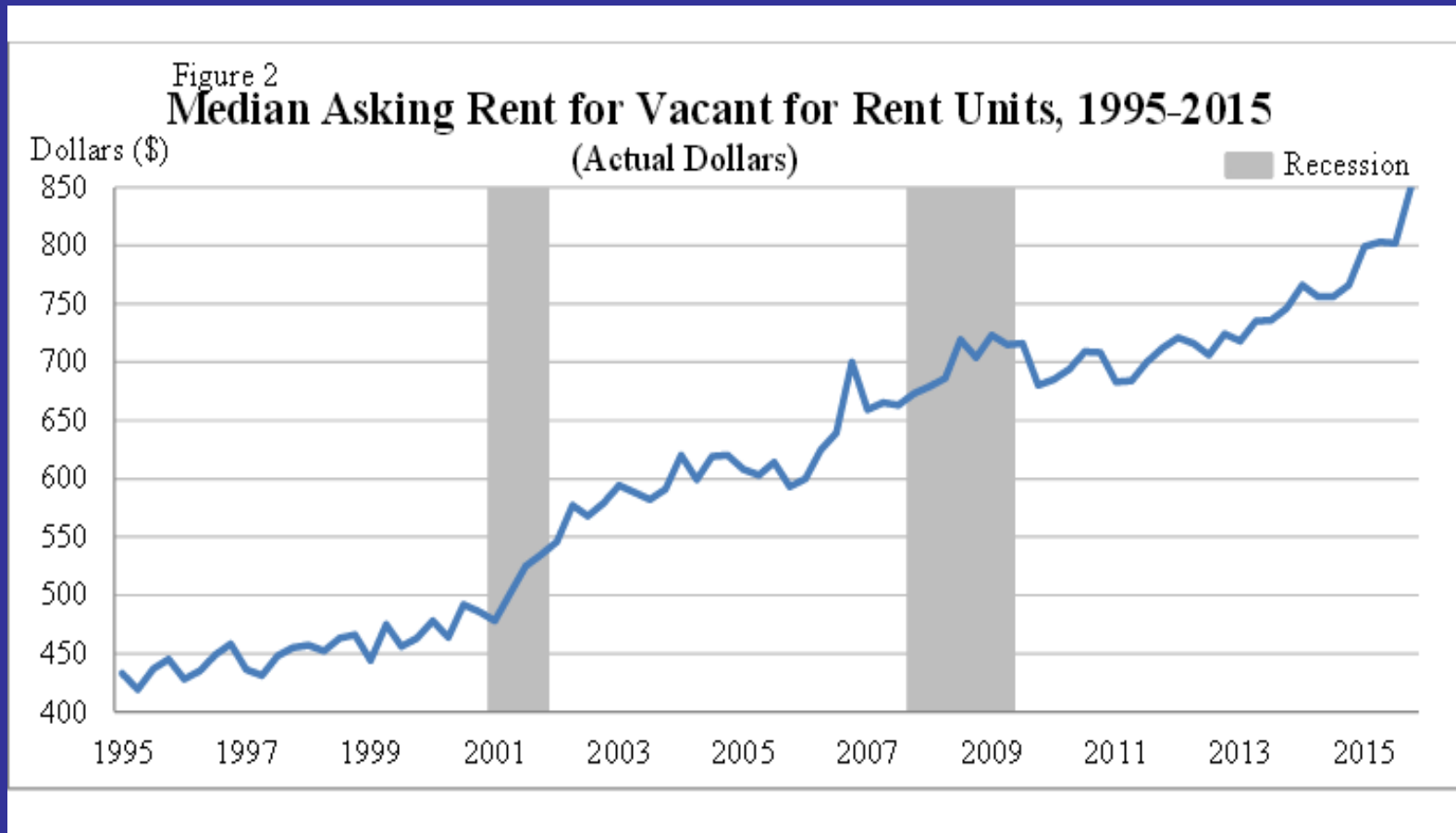
Falling rental vacancy rates will drive rental prices higher

And this will drive multi family construction – Economics 101 – *if I were a Builder, I would focus on rental construction*



# Increasing rents will slow housing starts - -

makes it more difficult for renters to save for down payment for house purchase

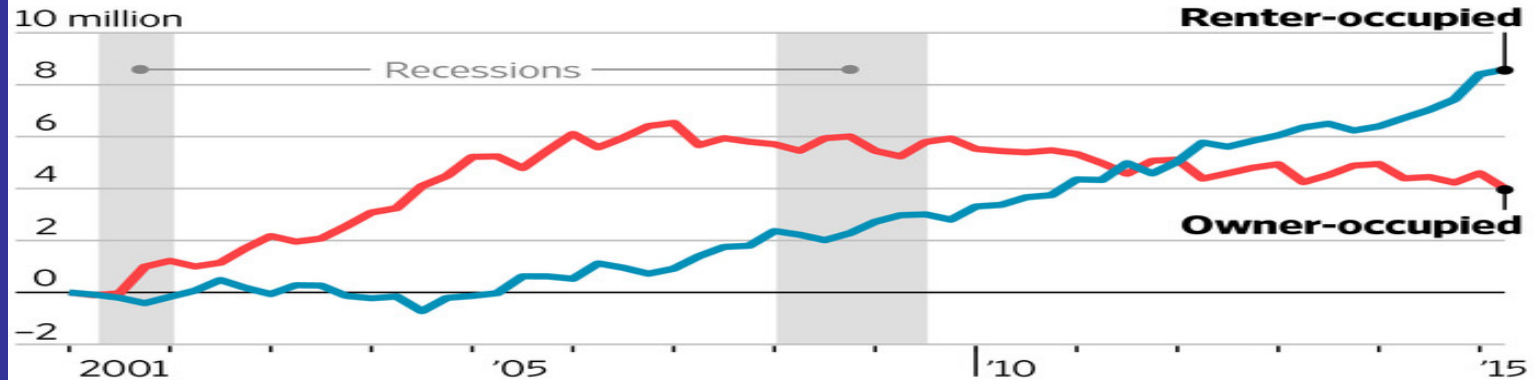


Household formations are up, but most are renting, and, in the past decade, Rent payments exceeded mortgage payments – but, most can't get a mortgage. Due to poor credit or can't save enough for a down payment – vicious circle

## Pricier Pads

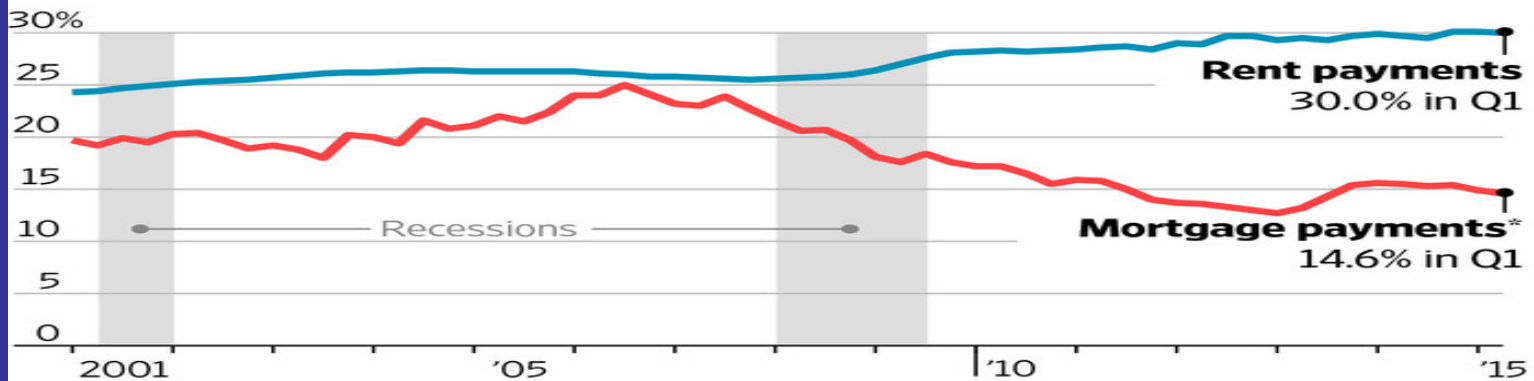
Since the housing bust, new household formation has consistently come from renters rather than owners...

Change in the number of U.S. households since the end of 2000



...and the climbing demand has made rents less affordable.

Median shelter costs as a share of median household income, nationwide

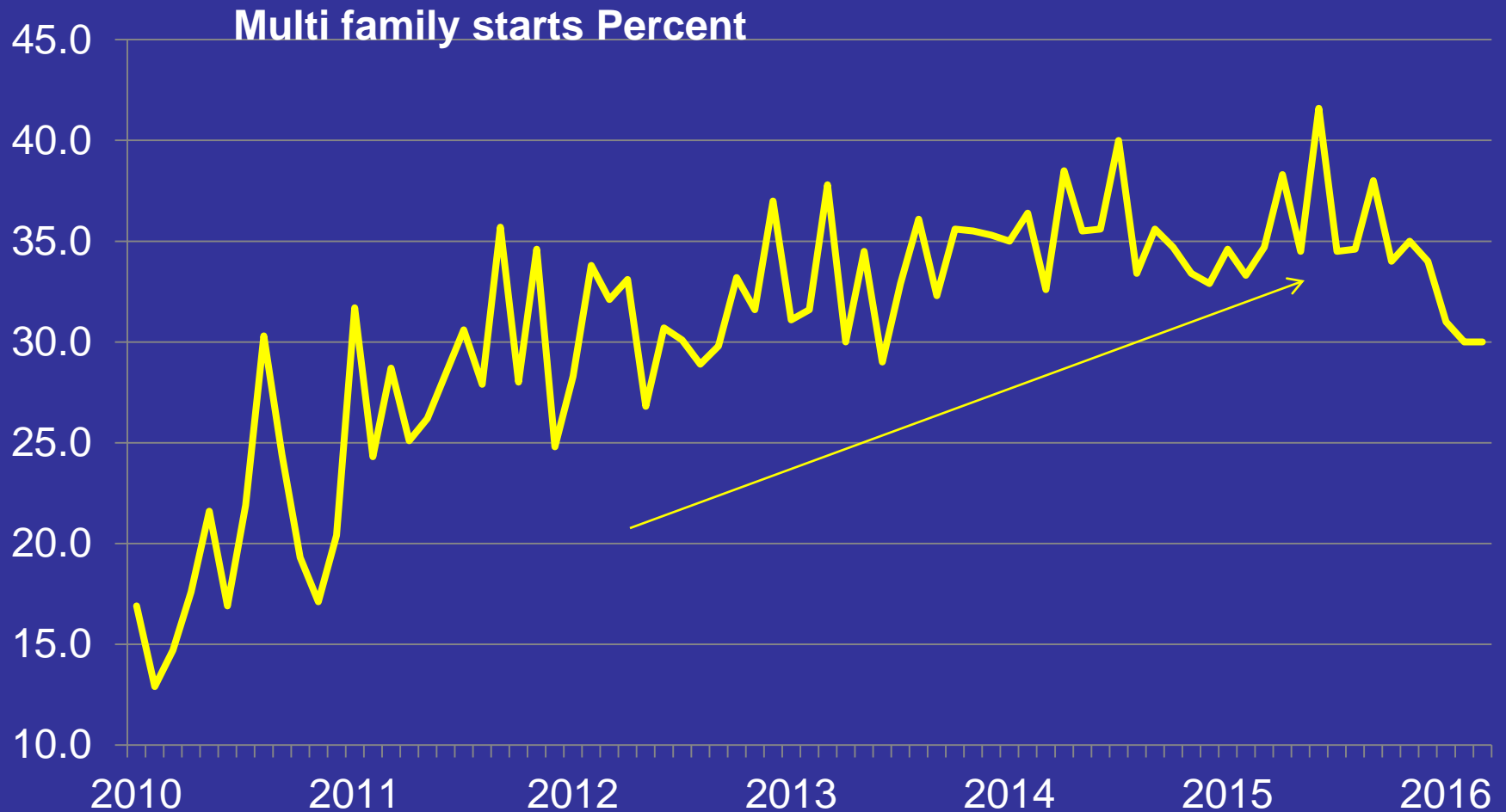


\*Assuming a 30-year fixed-rate mortgage with a 20% down payment; includes only principal and interest, not property tax or other homeownership costs.

Source: Census Bureau (households); Zillow (affordability)

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Multi family share of housing starts – upward trend expected to continue for some time. Also, since the housing crash in 2008, **Single family rentals** have now reached 13% of overall housing stock, up from 9% in 2005 ( <http://blogs.wsj.com/economics/2015/07/20/signs-of-overheating-in-the-single-family-rental-market/> )

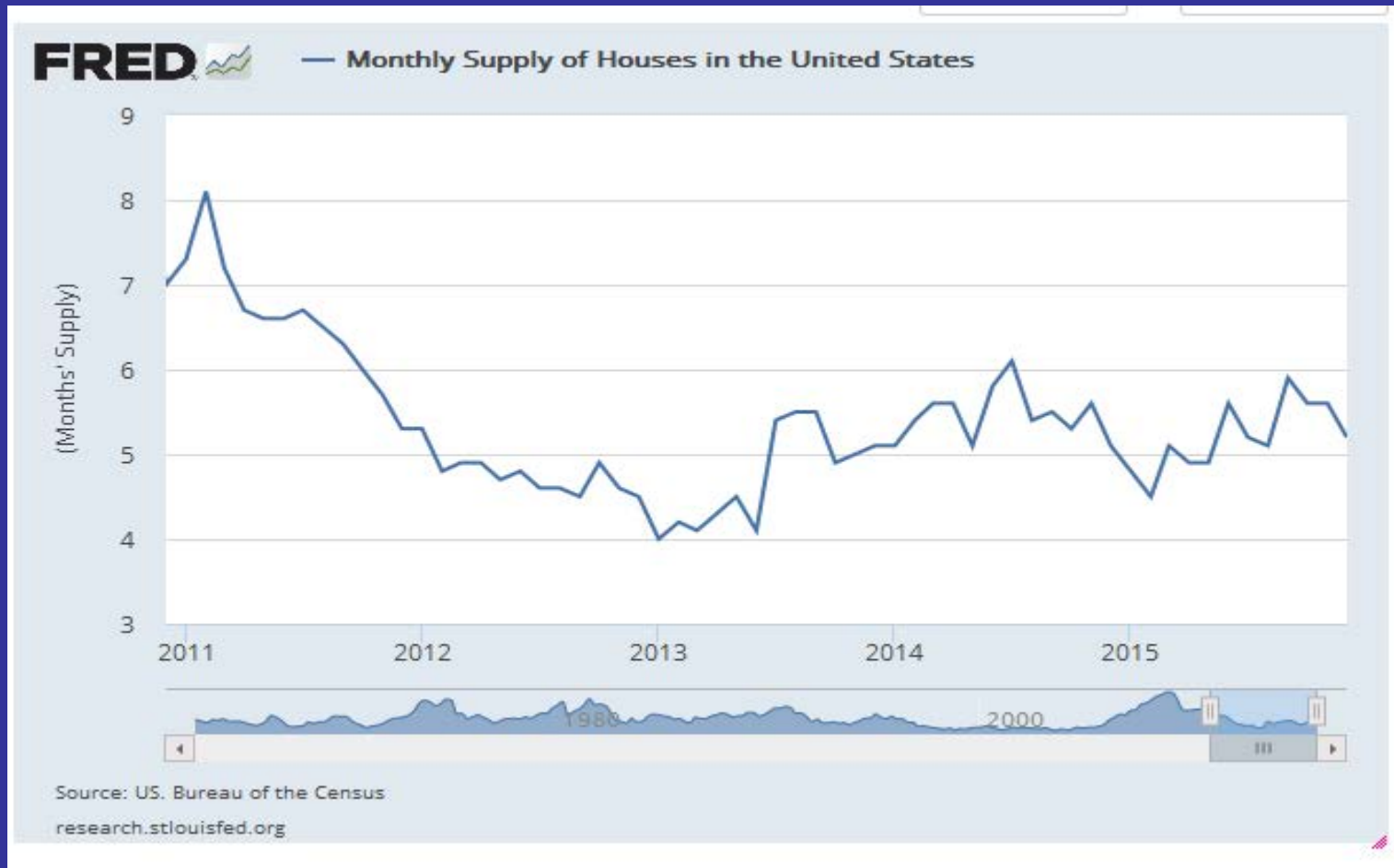


Source: Census

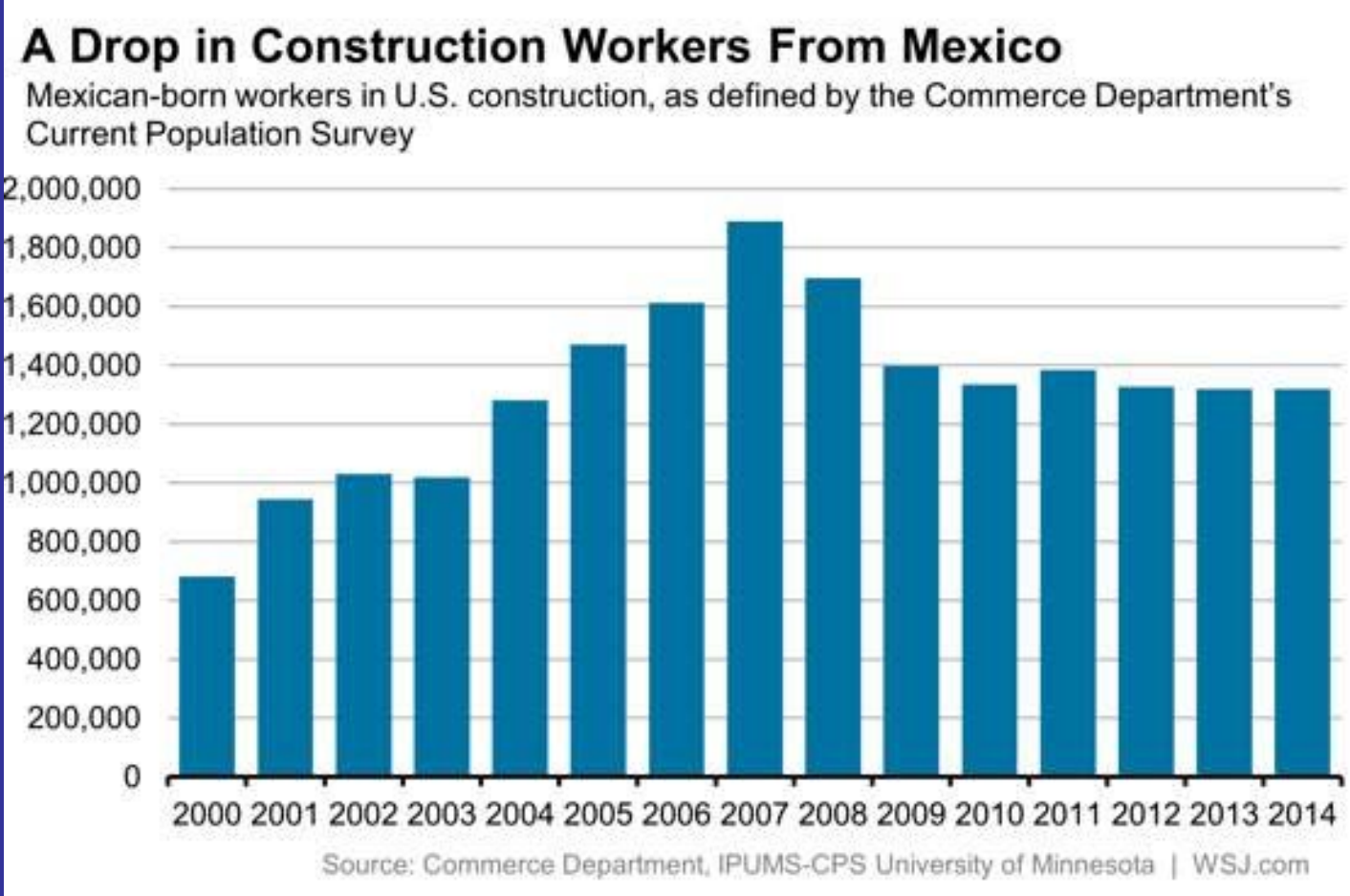


## Low new home inventory drives prices higher And out of reach to most 1<sup>st</sup> time buyers

But, builders can't find enough carpenters, masons, electricians, etc.  
So construction costs keep escalating = this exacerbates the inventory problem



Another problem (like we need more) for housing is labor shortages - - -  
Fewer immigrants from Mexico, plus aging demographics with native born  
Americans suggest that construction costs will increase driving prices higher  
And slowing home construction (<http://finance.yahoo.com/news/surprising-problem-holding-back-housing-170900724.html>)



Source: WSJ (<http://blogs.wsj.com/economics/2015/09/21/how-immigration-has-contributed-to-the-construction-worker-shortage/>)

Nearly 700,000 fewer construction workers today compared With 2007 – will mean construction delays and higher costs

## Help Wanted

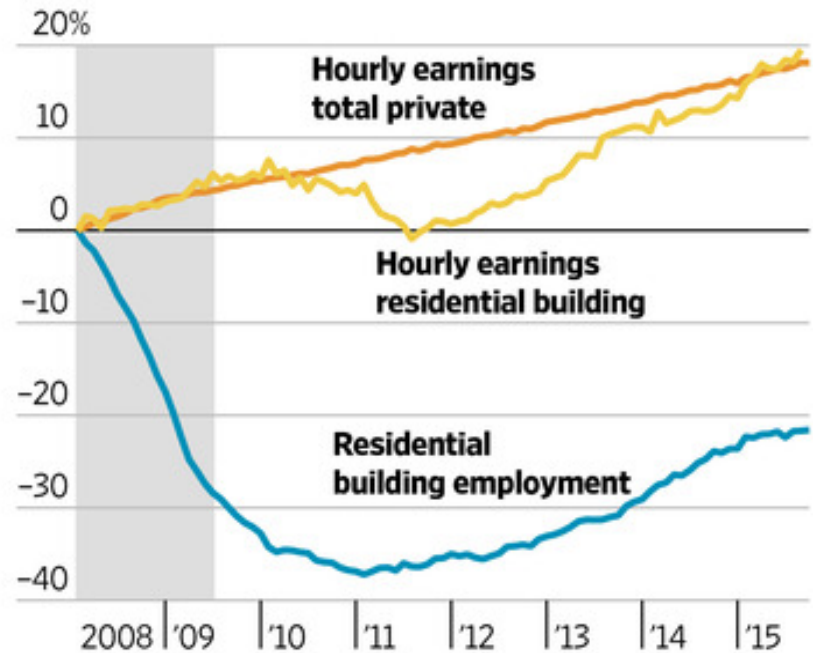
Home builders have been plagued by a skills mismatch, with openings outpacing hires in recent years, while construction workers' earnings have slowly climbed back to the overall average.

**Change in openings and hires in construction**



Source: Labor Department

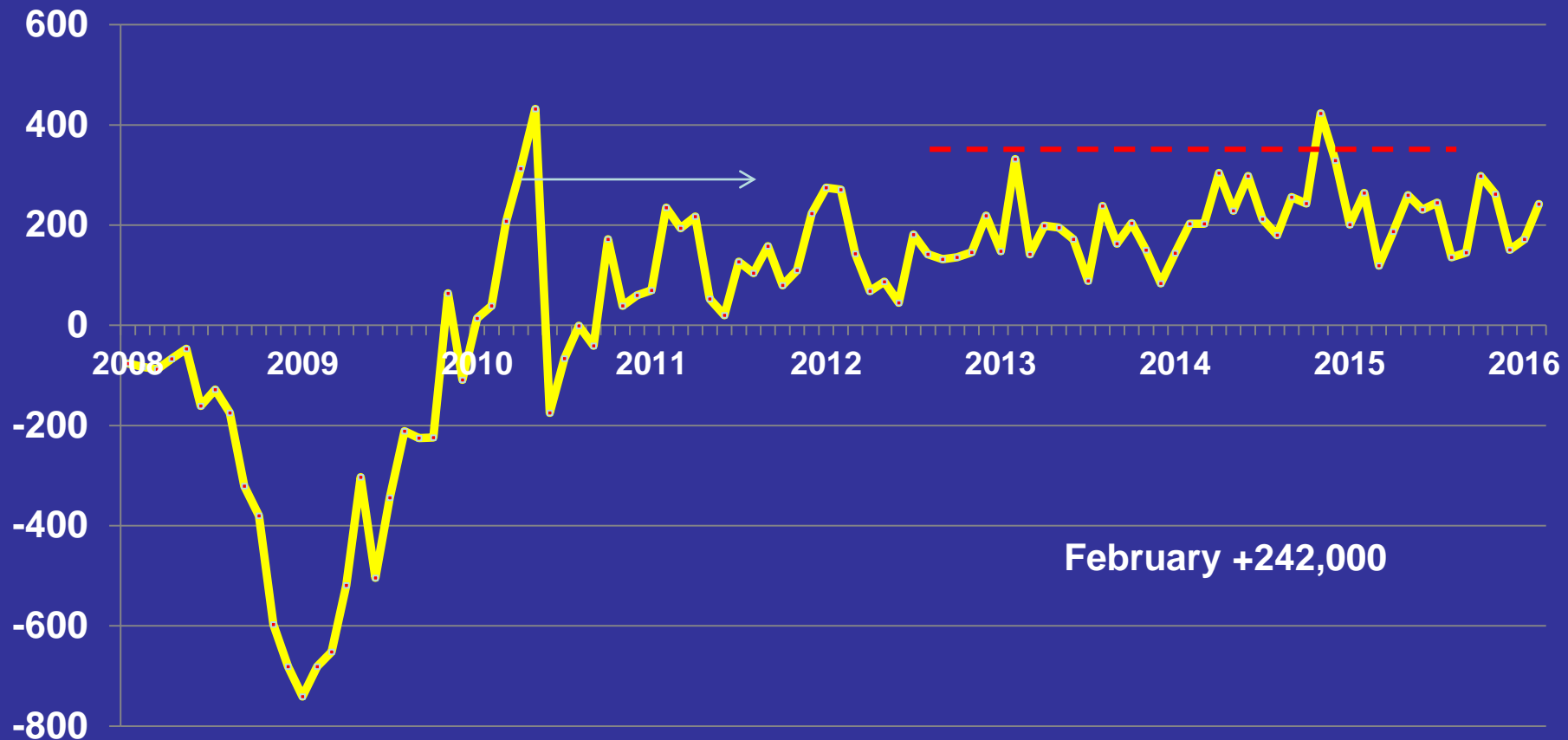
**Change in hourly earnings and employment**



THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

**Employment situation - our biggest problem – stuck near 200,000, and many of these jobs are part time with little or no benefits – not conducive to Driving housing demand higher**

**Net change in non farm payrolls – monthly, thousands**



Source: U.S. BLS ( [www.bls.gov](http://www.bls.gov) )

Another reason why job picture not so good – job creation by businesses is down significantly in past 10 years. Less innovation and risk taking is part of problem. My opinion – this is due to uncertainty and lack of confidence in the future direction of the country/economy. – and, too much regulation  
Again – lack of leadership from White House and Congress – neither Has demonstrated an understanding of the problems or solutions

## Less Dynamic Decade

The change in job creation due to business openings and job losses due to business closings from the level in the first quarter of 2005.



Source: Labor Department | WSJ.com

## Unemployment rate keeps coming down – but, nearly 7 million remain “underemployed” – working part time, but want full time jobs

\*\*There are about 16 million people either unemployed, underemployed, or stopped Looking – **Key reason why wage increases are stagnant!!!**



## A look at real incomes over the past twenty years ---

real incomes have been shrinking for the past 20 years

And the reason is probably tied to productivity - here is good article

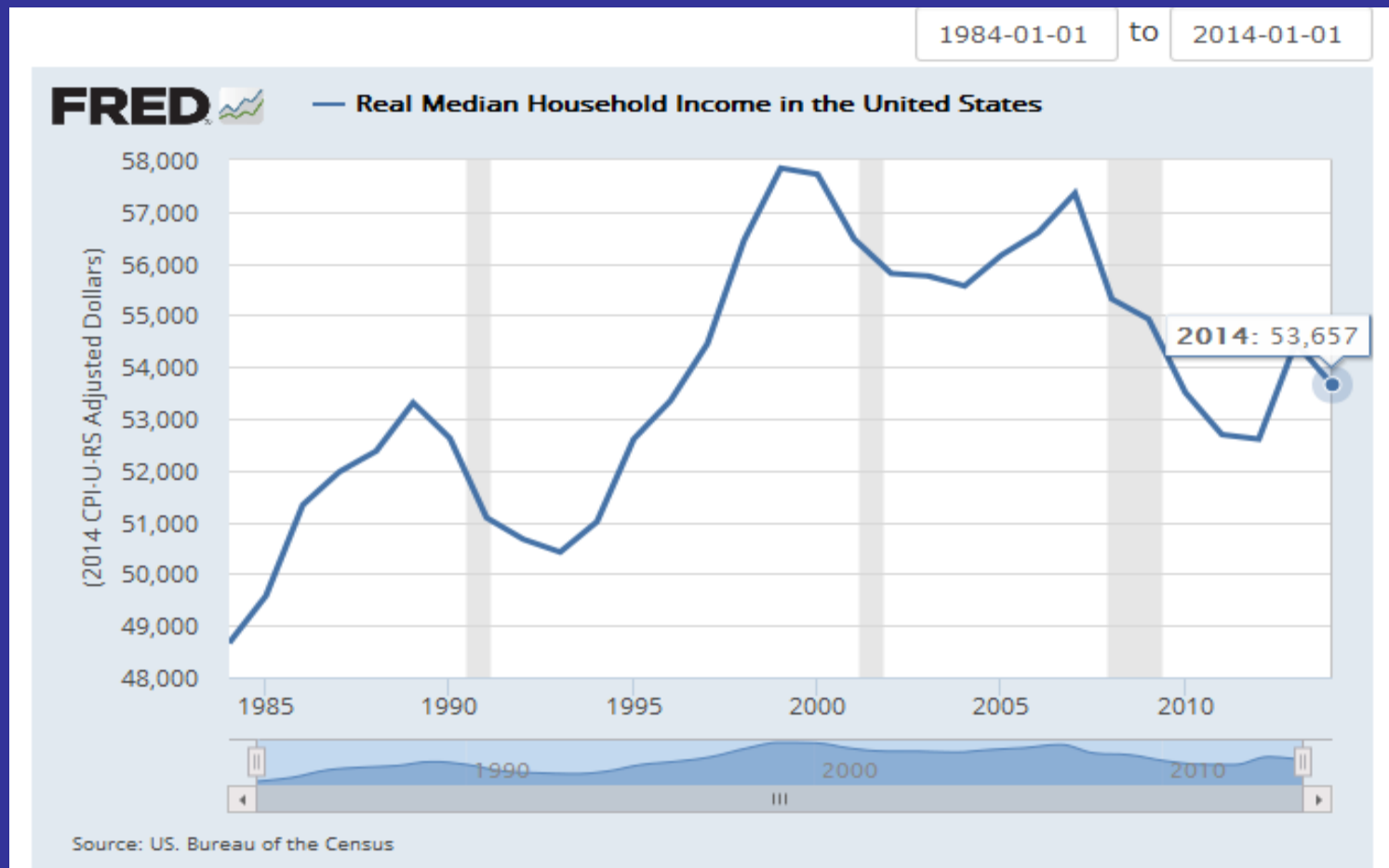
On the subject

(<http://www.wsj.com/articles/politicians-pay-heed-to-productivity-problem-1437582206?cb=logged0.19101819254186214>)

Also, with the weak economy, more people are receiving transfer payments

( food stamps, Medicaid, CHIP, housing allowances, etc). Good programs in theory,

But in practice they often reduce incentives to work - this reduces the labor participation rate

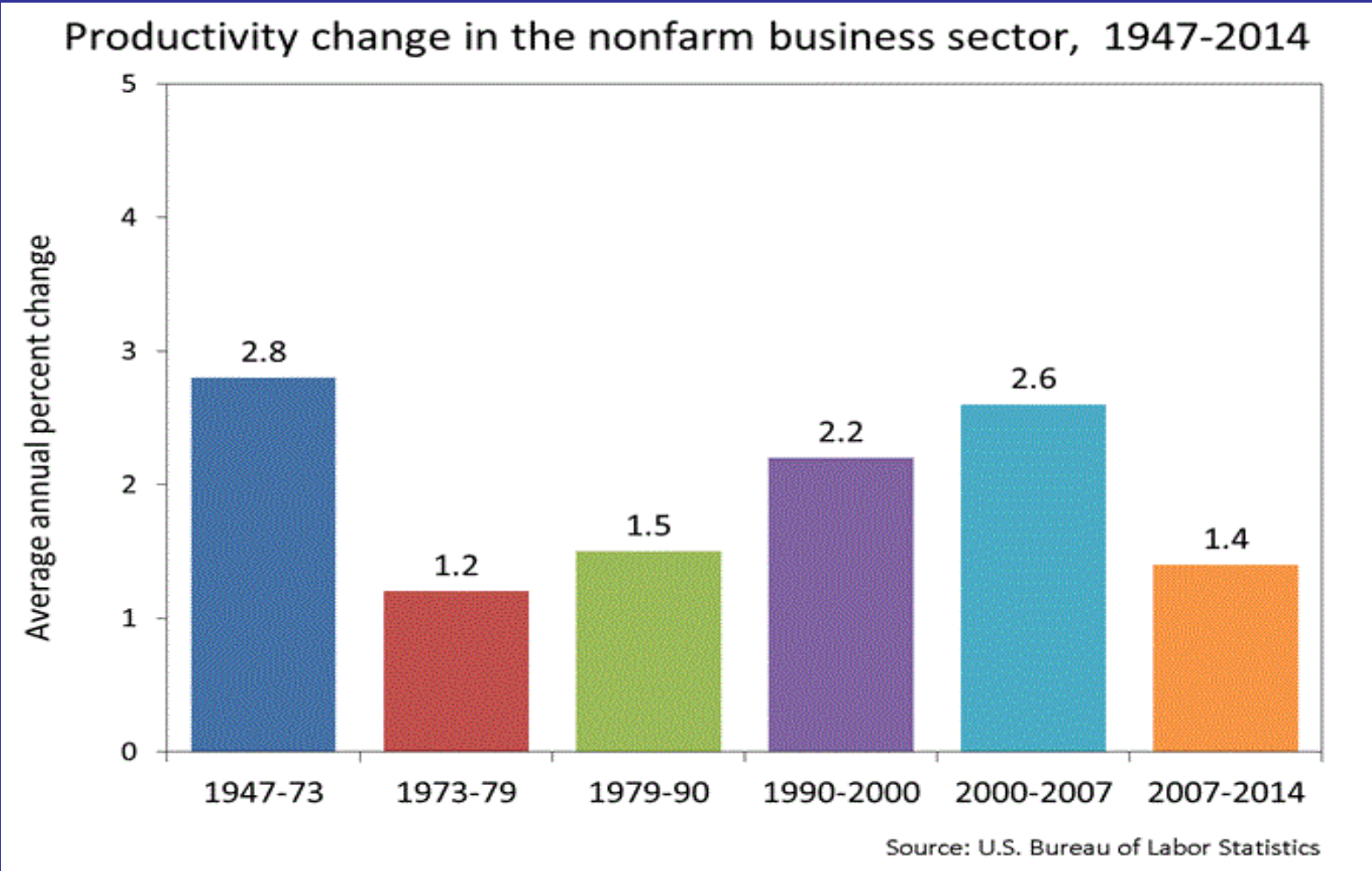




We need to invest more to become more competitive, create better paying jobs,  
This is best way to grow GDP

GDP derives from number of workers plus productivity (real GDP/worker) –  
(<http://marketrealist.com/2015/01/2-factors-drive-real-gdp-growth/>) -- with lower productivity , higher employment won't  
generate as much growth in GDP – this is why improving employment doesn't give us strong GDP growth

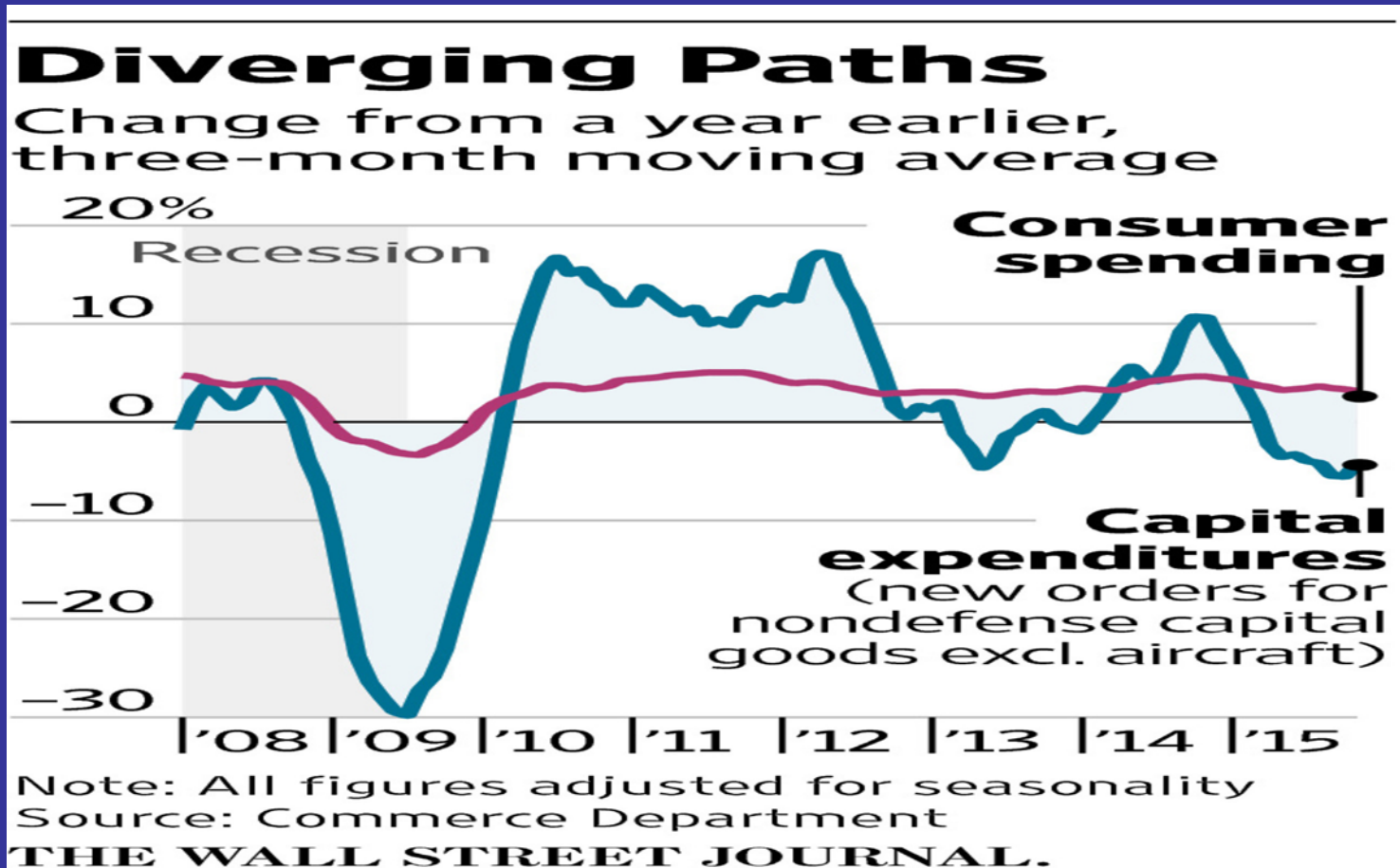
*Innovation and entrepreneurship is key to increasing productivity*



Source: BLS ( <http://www.bls.gov/lpc/prodybar.htm> )



GDP growth comes from more workers and increasing productivity – simple math!!!  
 Workforce participation ( and population growth rate) is falling in USA.  
 Now, capital expenditures Are falling. Less **investment/capital spending** leads to lower productivity. **Bottom line – Slower growth over next 5 – 10 years???**  
**And less demand for housing!!!** *(PS – I understand that productivity measurement is a problem as new products/services quality is difficult To measure so maybe we are underestimating real productivity?)*

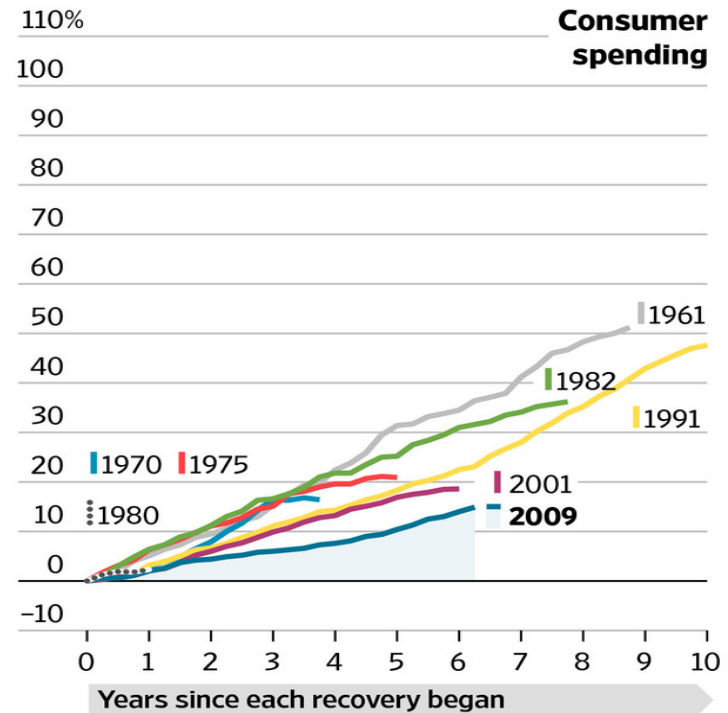
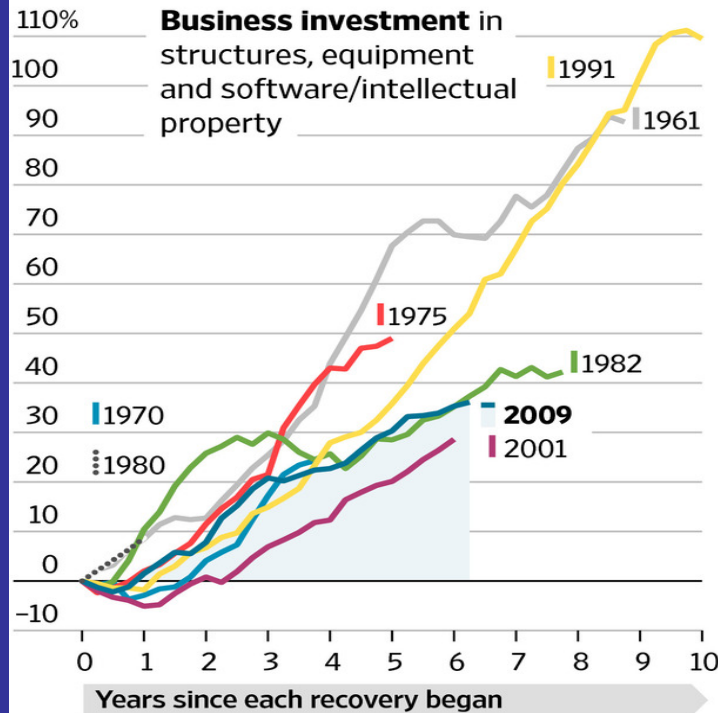


Investment is down because demand just isn't there – maybe We're not creating enough new products people want to buy. Again – innovation, risk taking is key

## Business Investment Cools

Pent-up demand fueled businesses' capital expenditures early in the expansion, but that spending has leveled off, creating an obstacle to present and future growth.

### Change since each recovery began, adjusted for inflation



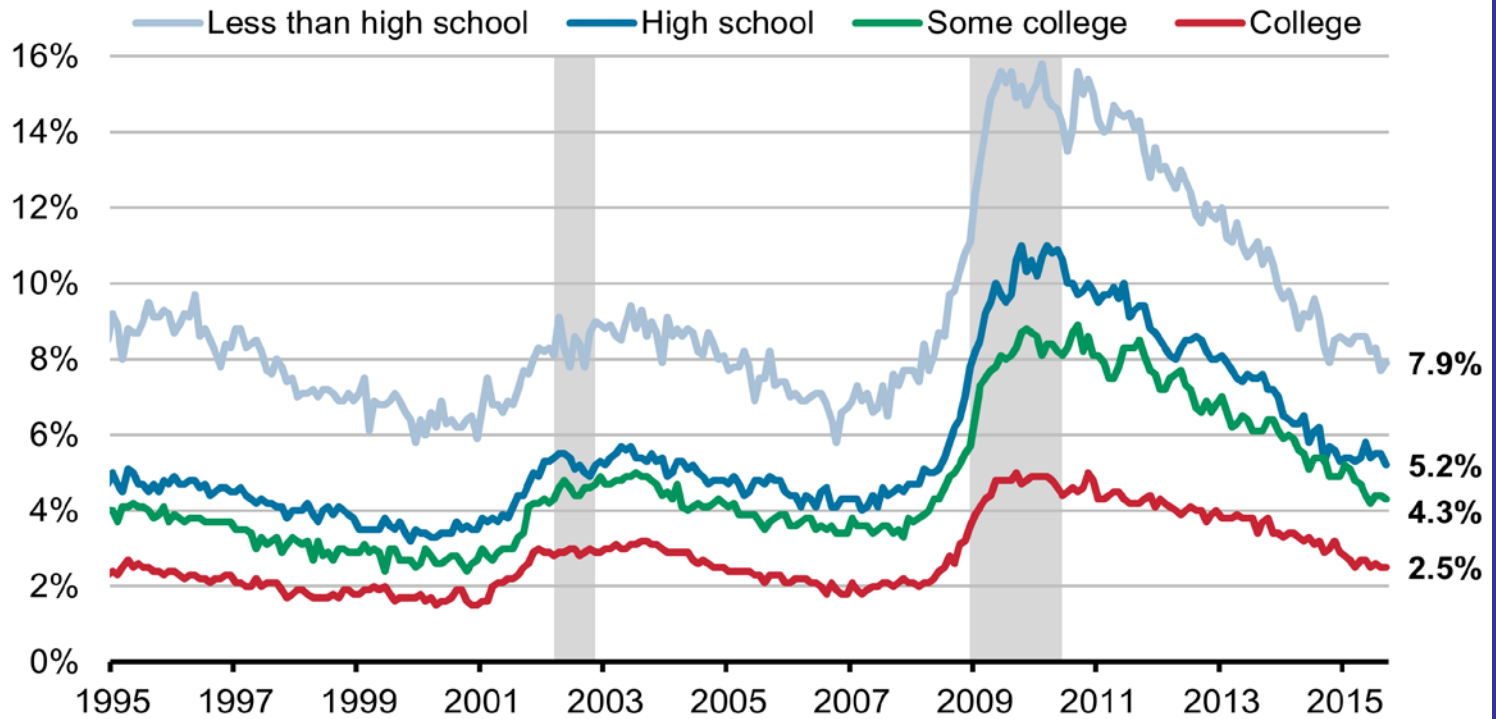
Note: All figures adjusted for seasonality  
Source: Commerce Department

Andrew Van Dam and Eric Morath/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

One way to improve productivity and incomes ---  
education improves your chances of staying out of the  
unemployment line

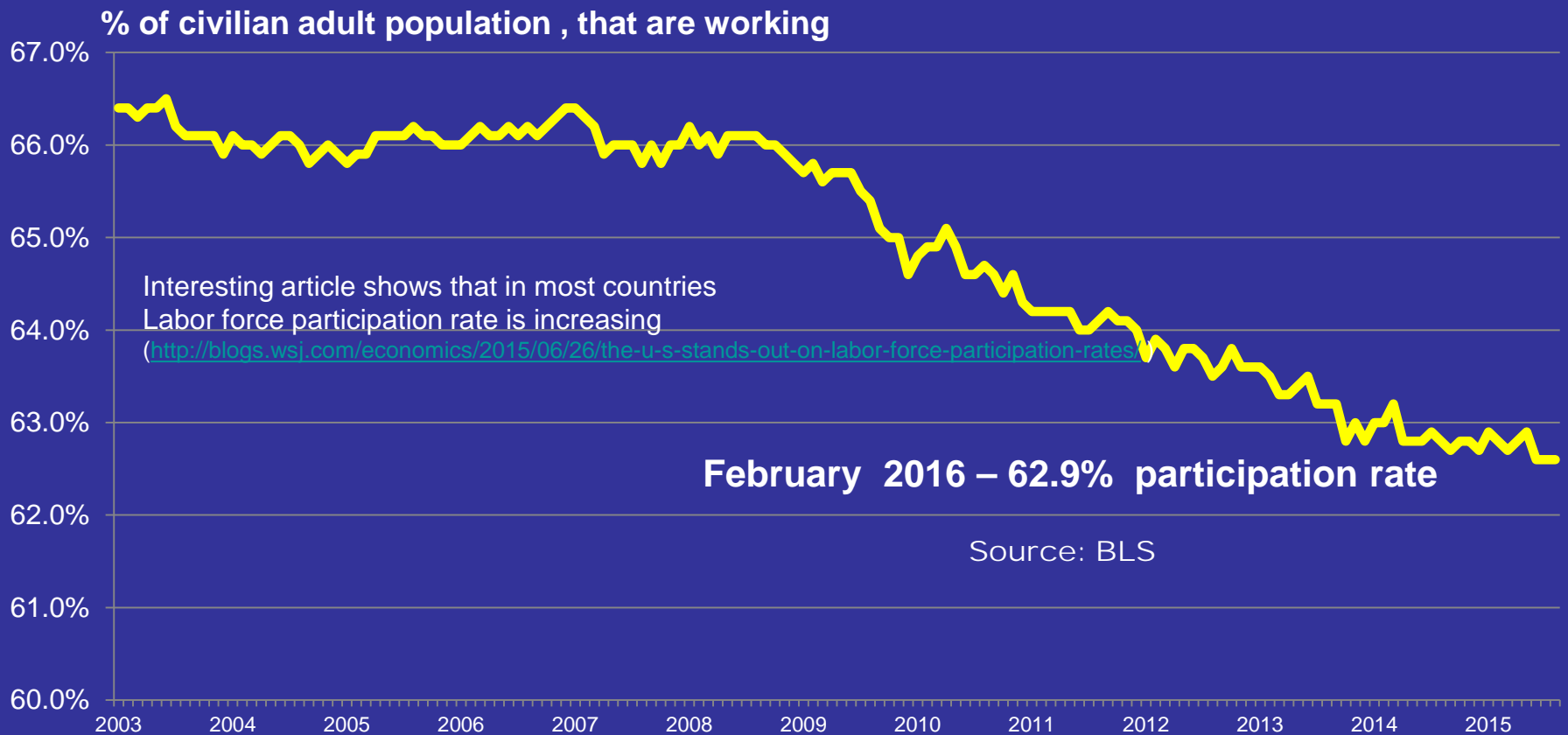
## School Work

Unemployment rate for civilians 25 years and over by educational attainment, seasonally adjusted, as of September



Source: Labor Department | WSJ.com

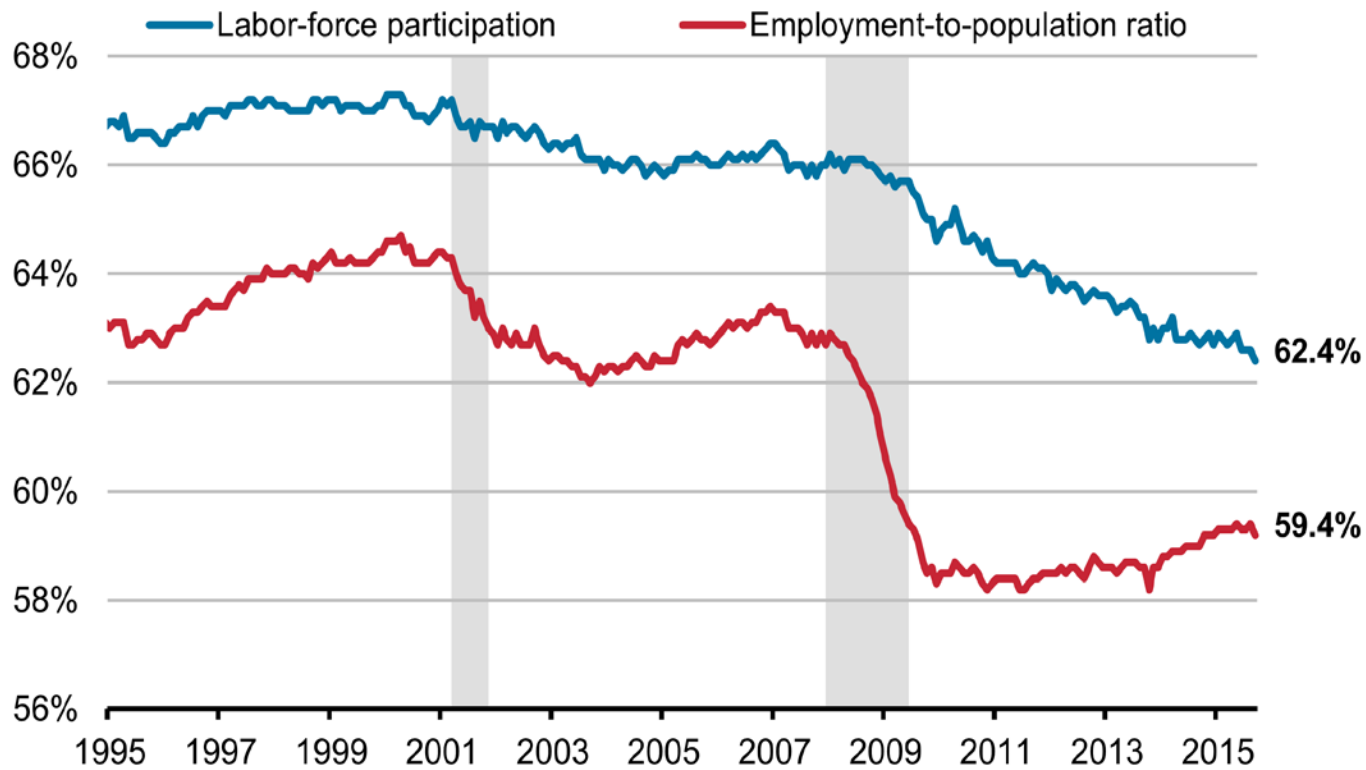
Labor force participation rate is shrinking – demographics is probably the main reason – we'll see skilled labor shortages increase over the next decade - we're already seeing construction related shortages with brick layers, masons, electricians, plumbers, etc. One solution – Revamp our education system (a 4 year degree isn't for everyone – 2 year Community colleges, vocational schools, are better fit for many, and they are much cheaper). Excellent article (<http://finance.yahoo.com/news/should-i-go-to-a-trade-school-162413337.html#> )



# Aging population is part of the problem, but weak economy and mismatch between skills of job seekers and available jobs isn't helping

## Not Participating

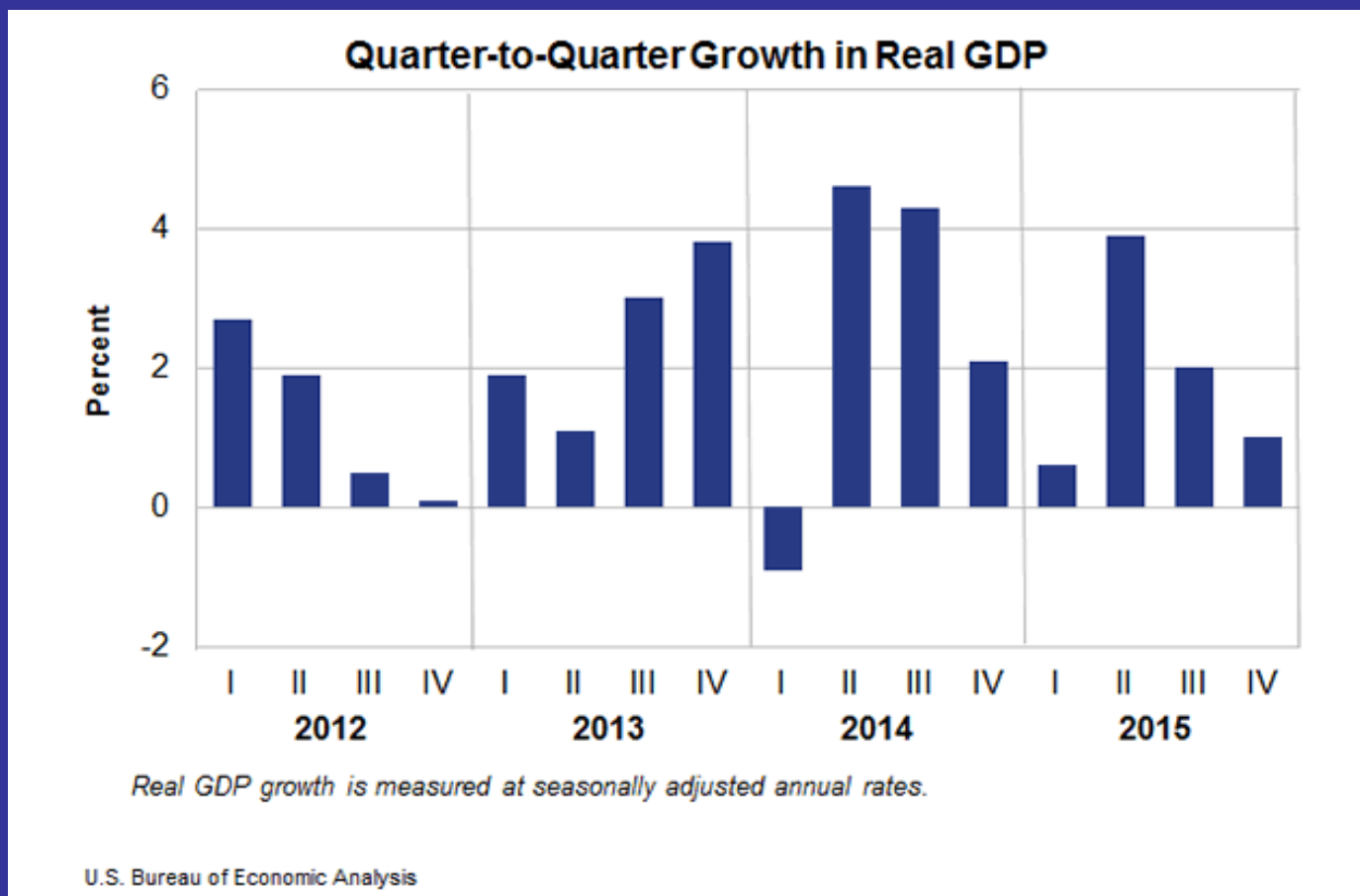
Share of civilians in the U.S. labor force and employment-to-population ratio, seasonally adjusted, as of September



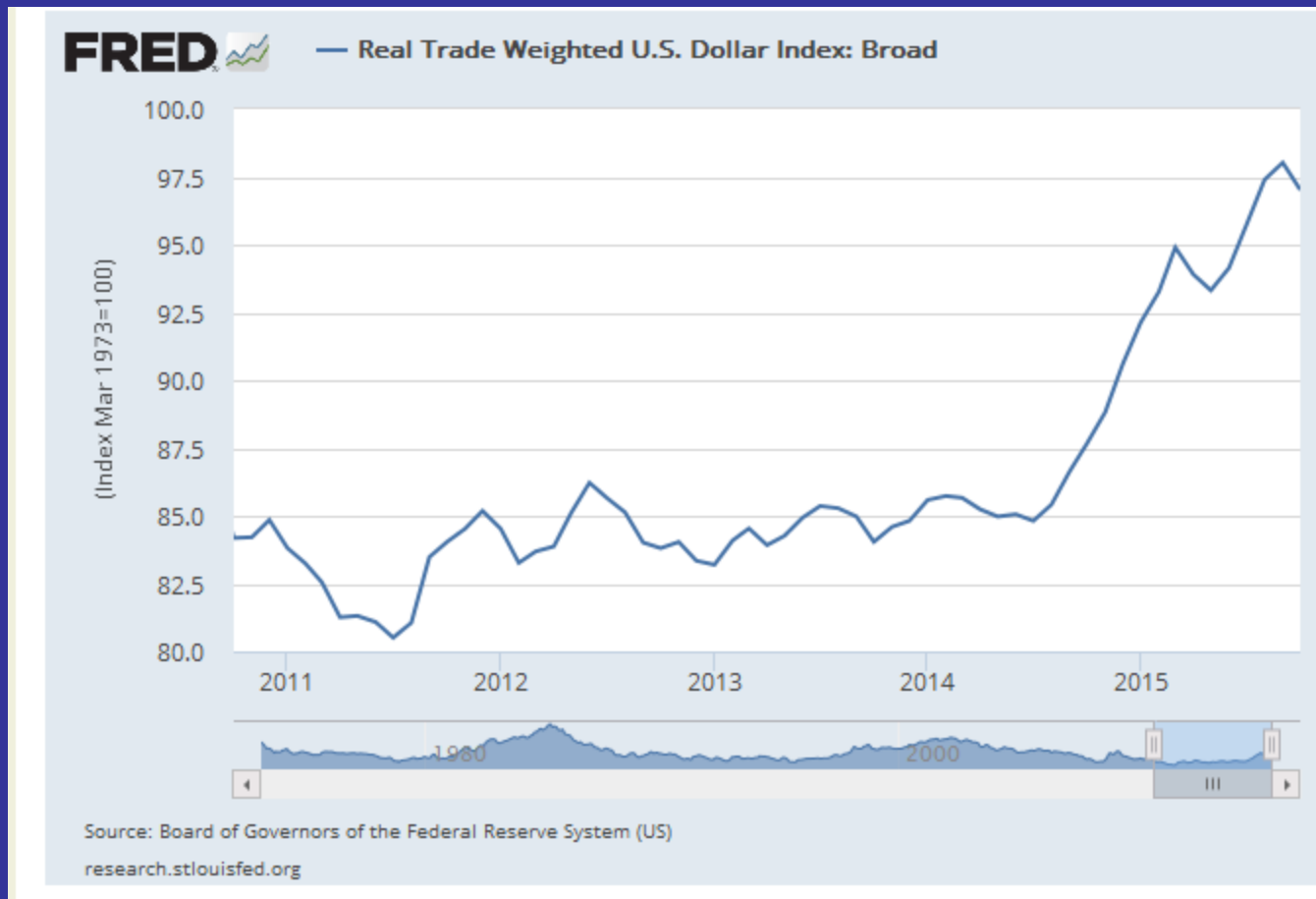
Source: Labor Department | WSJ.com

4th Qtr Economic growth a dismal 1.4% - rate for 2015 was 2.4%  
2016 - 2017 GDP expected to remain about 2% - not enough to drive housing

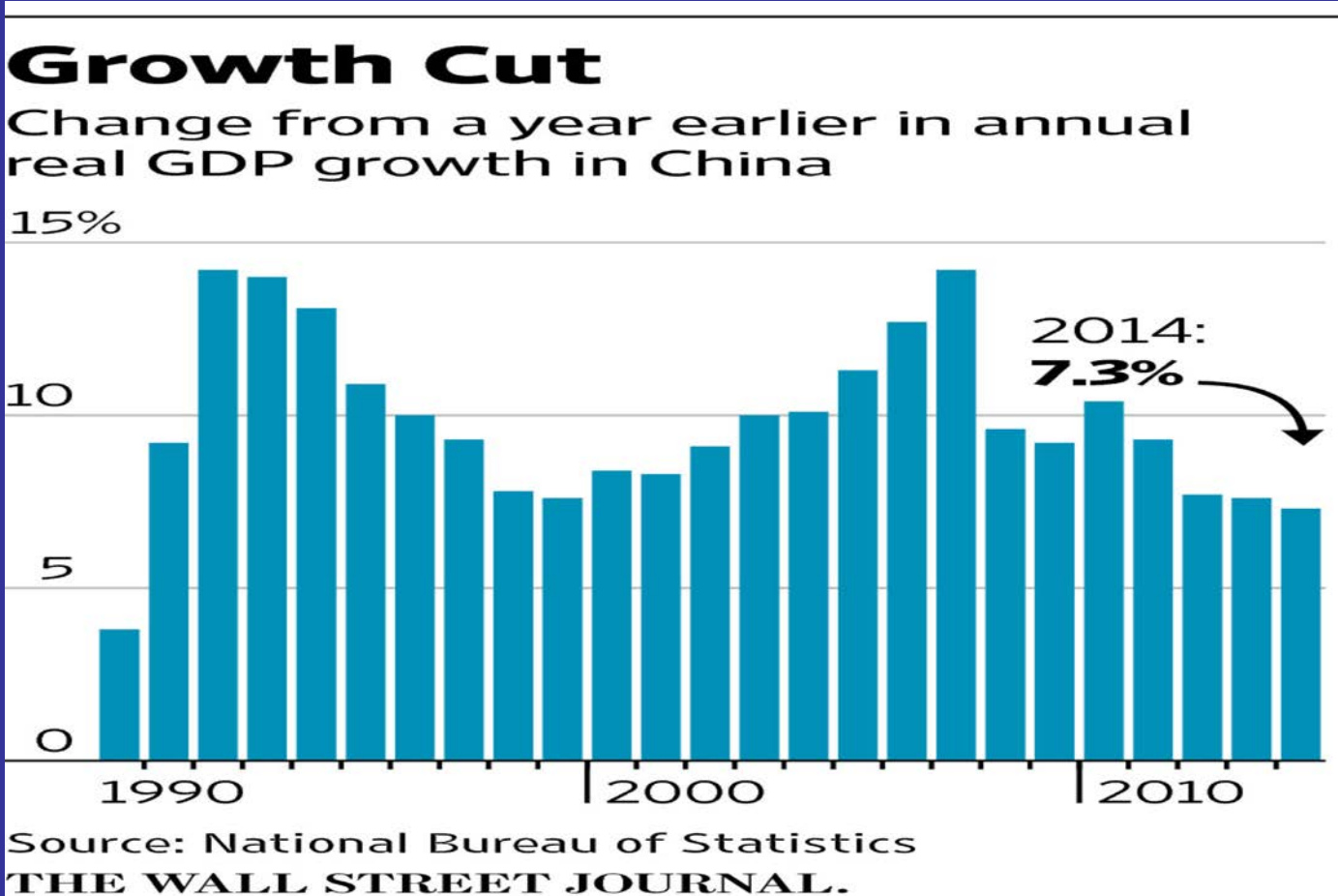
- (1) Slowing world economy ( weaker China and European growth)
- (2) Stronger dollar will reduce exports and increase imports - negative impact on manufacturing jobs which is key to income growth in USA
- (3) Political stalemate/weak leadership, terrorism, currency wars, growing national debt, ...
- (4) Weak income growth and continuing high "real unemployment"



Strengthening dollar another headwind for U.S. economy  
Keeps inflation down, but hurts exports from key manufacturing sector  
Most countries are deflating their currencies to prop up weak economies  
Further strengthening US dollar



China's growth is slowing, - this is key to world economy ( China Is 2<sup>nd</sup> largest economy) and even more important for Commodity prices - The recent Yuan devaluation is an indication that the Chinese government Is concerned. *For past 5 - 6 years, China accounted for the bulk of world GDP Growth so any slowdown will have major ripple effects*



Source: WSJ ( <http://www.wsj.com/articles/china-cuts-2014-economic-growth-to-7-3-from-7-4-1441593730> )



# Recent Housing statistics

Starts are inching forward – But, Low Interest rates won't fix housing!!! We need good paying jobs, and, to date, that is not happening fast enough

## Single family starts, Thousand units, SAAR



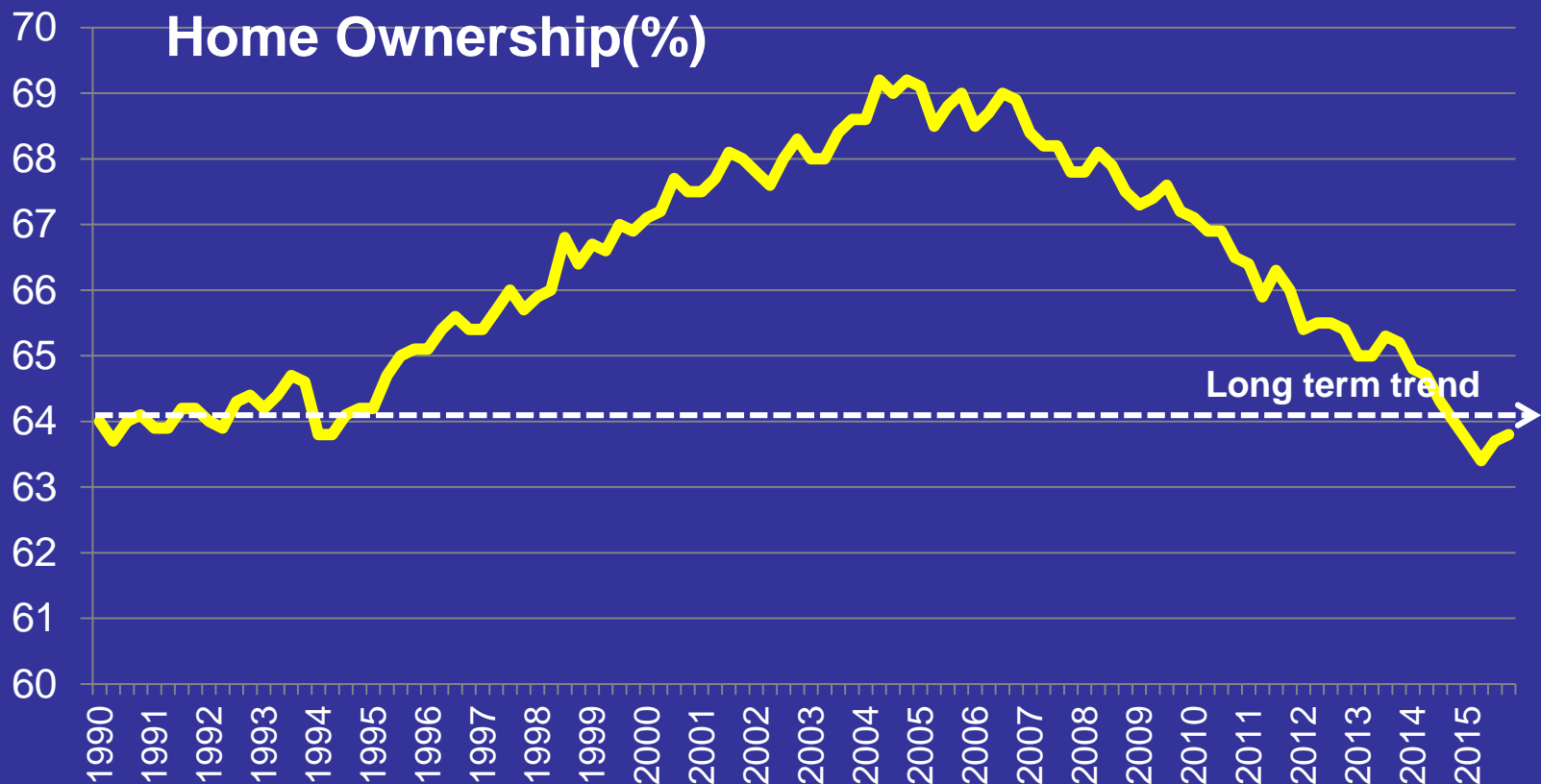
## Impact of weak household formations and shift to renting - -

homeownership rates have been falling for the past ten years - when the economy gets back to normal, Will people return to home ownership or will renting remain in favor with many? There will be impacts on wood products demand

Rate for millennial use to be 43% - now it is 35% - more young people are renting

**Good article with some reasons why ownership is falling and why it will continue to fall for some time**

( <http://finance.yahoo.com/news/why-americans-waiting-longer-ever-070132848.html> )



Source: Census (<https://www.census.gov/housing/hvs/data/q413ind.html>)

# New Single Family Home sales are the key statistic to watch – Sales drive housing starts – this drives demand for wood products!!!

up 5.4% versus March 2015  
Disappointing considering we're 8  
Years "recovering" from the 2008 collapse



Source: Census (<http://www.census.gov/const/www/newressalesindex.html>)

Resale market continues to improve, but still heavy to cash sales (20%) with 1<sup>st</sup> time buyers still below trend, but improving ( traditionally they represent about 40 – 45% of market, but today they are at 31%). Another problem today is tight Supply (which drives prices), currently at 4.4 months. Healthy market is about 6 months supply. Median prices are up 5.4%, annual basis – driven by weak supply and Not demand

Single family (incl condos), Monthly, Thousand units, SAAR



## Some conclusions – housing continues to improve albeit slowly

- (1) Economy will continue to improve slowly -- **2016 growth expected to be about 2.0% - and slowdown in China is having serious ripple effects on world economy**
- (2) Still not a healthy housing market - 1<sup>st</sup> time buyers (31% today) are below trend (45%) and household formations are off 40% from trend.
- (4) Political discourse will continue to slow a truly strong economic and housing recovery – too much uncertainty re: Affordable Care Act/Obama care; immigration reform; direction of economy.; terrorism; **weak leadership!!!!!!!!!!!!**
- (5) **Productivity is a problem for U.S. economy – real GDP driven by population ( number of workers) and real GDP/worker or productivity. During past 7 years, productivity has grown 1.7% annually whereas the average over previous 17 years was 2.4%.**
- (6) World economy is slowing – China, particularly, but Europe also experiencing problems as well as the commodity focused economies like Australia and Canada . Demographics are a major reason as world fertility rates continue to fall in most of the developed world. Immigration reform needed, but this will be difficult with terrorism concerns.
- (7) The fed raised interest rates – but most analysts expect any further increases to be gradual. Minor impact on housing, but, then, housing doesn't need more headwinds.
- (8) **Weak leadership and misguided programs from White House and Congress is the main problem and deterrent To any significant improvement in the economy here in USA. – sad commentary – we ( electorate) need to wake up soon or resign ourselves to years of falling standard of living and lower quality of life for large segments of our population. This will result in increased social problems – ... and this means weak housing numbers and mediocre GDP for years!!!!!!!!**

## **Longer term:**

- (1) *Makeup of U.S. economy is changing and this is impacting spending patterns and housing choices. The job market is undergoing long term – structural – changes. Automation is reducing job prospects for the middle class while creating jobs for the highly skilled and less skilled sectors . End result is stagnating family incomes that could translate to lower total housing demand with more emphasis on multi family/rental demand. Doesn't bode well for wood product demand and prices.*
- (2) **Education is more important today than ever before – don't forget two year programs; community Colleges; apprenticeships;... 4 year/University degree not always best option**
- (4) Currency devaluations are the preferred solution to “low inflation” concerns. Central banks in Europe and Japan are following the U.S. with quantitative easing/printing money, in order to spur demand by weakening their currencies. Good article in WSJ suggesting that the “low inflation world” is really a symptom of too much capacity relative to demand, and the solution isn't currency devaluation. Better solution may be developing technology to produce products that fulfill market place demands not being met by existing products ([http://www.wsj.com/articles/global-glut-challenges-policy-makers-1429867807?mod=rss\\_markets\\_main](http://www.wsj.com/articles/global-glut-challenges-policy-makers-1429867807?mod=rss_markets_main) )
- (5) Eventually, Central banks will have to raise rates and nobody knows how the various economies will respond. We've never had so much liquidity in the system – it causes various types of bubbles ( assets like houses, stocks, etc.), and a misallocation of resources. Interesting times ahead.
- (6) **Rental housing demand is expected to remain relatively strong for some time into the future – demographics; economy; debt/credit issues; ... will constrain single family demand**