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The Mortgage Analyst

Credit Strategy Research

Tracking liquidity using trading volume data

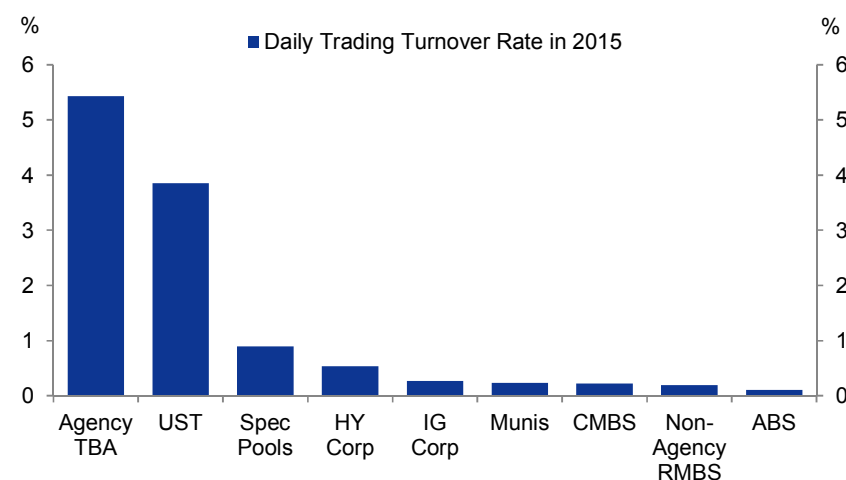
Trading turnover rates declined post-crisis

Market liquidity is front and center in our conversations with investors. We focus on trading volumes in measuring market liquidity. We find that trading turnover rates fell significantly post-crisis across asset classes. While turnover rates have since stabilized in some sectors, other products including CMBS continue to see turnover rates trending down.

Liquidity advantage supports agency MBS

The TBA market is substantially more liquid than many other bond markets. Its daily turnover rate exceeds even US Treasuries. As investors are placing an increasing premium on liquidity, we think the demand for agency mortgages will remain strong in 2016.

Agency TBA market has a higher daily turnover rate than US Treasuries



Source: FINRA TRACE, eMBS, FRBNY, Barclays, SIFMA, CoreLogic, and Goldman Sachs Global Investment Research.

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Tracking liquidity using trading volume data

Market liquidity has been a recurring theme in our conversations with fixed income investors. Our colleagues have previously looked at dealer inventories, examined bid-ask spreads, and interviewed market participants in assessing the liquidity landscape ("Negative inventories bode poorly for corporate bond liquidity," *Global Markets Daily*, November 10, 2015, "Bond market liquidity has declined (but this decline is hard to measure)," *Global Markets Daily*, August 11, 2015, "A Look at Liquidity," *Top of Mind*, August 2, 2015). Their work highlights both the importance of the topic and the difficulties in measuring market liquidity.

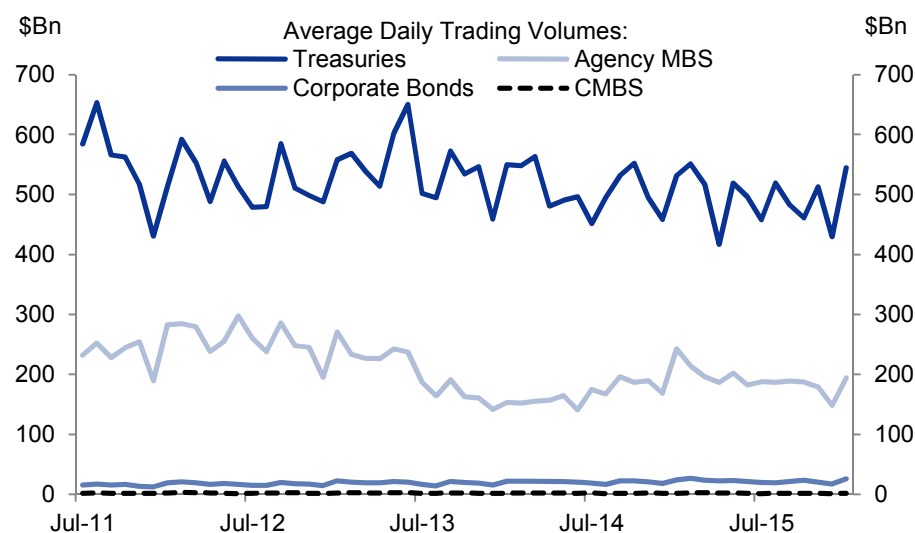
The significance of market liquidity to the economy and financial stability has not escaped policymakers' attention. Researchers at the New York Fed have been publishing a series of blogs on liquidity conditions in the mortgage, corporate, and Treasury markets.¹ In this *Mortgage Analyst*, we focus specifically on trading volumes in the fixed income market. Our main finding is that, while trading volumes are generally trending down across all sectors, including agency MBS, the TBA market continues to enjoy a substantial liquidity advantage relative to other bond sectors, including even US Treasuries. As investors are placing an increasing premium on liquidity, we think the demand for agency mortgages will remain strong in 2016.

The correct way to measure liquidity using trading volumes

The average daily trading volumes vary dramatically across assets in the fixed income market (Exhibit 1). Treasuries and agency mortgage-backed securities (MBS) are among the most traded products, with approximately \$500 billion and \$200 billion, respectively, changing hands on average each day. By contrast, corporate bonds and commercial mortgage-backed securities (CMBS) have much lower daily trading volumes, running at a current pace of \$20 billion and less than \$2 billion per day, respectively.

Exhibit 1: Large variation in trading volumes across products

Average daily trading volumes by asset



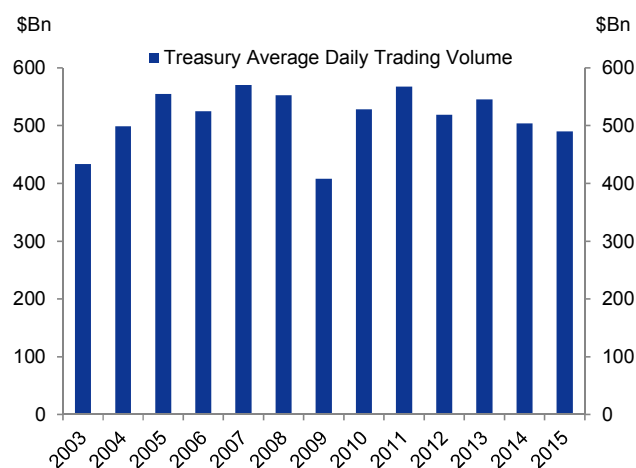
Source: FINRA TRACE and Federal Reserve Bank of New York.

¹ See <http://libertystreeteconomics.newyorkfed.org/2016/02/continuing-the-conversation-on-liquidity.html>.

Changes in trading volumes by themselves may not be a meaningful indicator of changes in market liquidity for three reasons. First, market size matters. Given the same liquidity, we expect a bigger market to have higher trading volumes. For example, average daily trading volumes of Treasuries in 2015 were similar to those seen in 2004 (Exhibit 2). But the total amount of Treasuries outstanding more than tripled from 2004 to 2015 (Exhibit 3). This suggests that the trading turnover rate has fallen notably in the Treasury market.

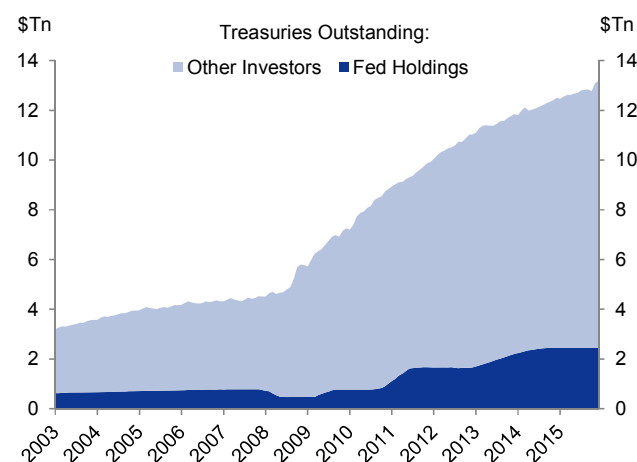
Second, investor base matters. From 2008 to 2015, agency MBS daily average trading volumes fell from \$340 billion to \$190 billion while total agency MBS outstanding increased 18%, implying drastically lower turnover rates (Exhibits 4 and 5). However, this calculation is misleading because the Federal Reserve purchased large amounts of agency MBS during its QE programs and the central bank does not actively trade its holdings. When the Fed share is excluded, total net agency MBS outstanding *fell* 18% from 2008 to 2015. Note that not all shifts in investor base need to be adjusted. This is because of the potential reverse causality problem: worsening market liquidity could lead to securities moving from high-frequency traders to buy-and-hold investors. In this case, changes in investor base are the consequence, not the cause, of deterioration in liquidity conditions.

Exhibit 2: Treasury trading volumes changed little...



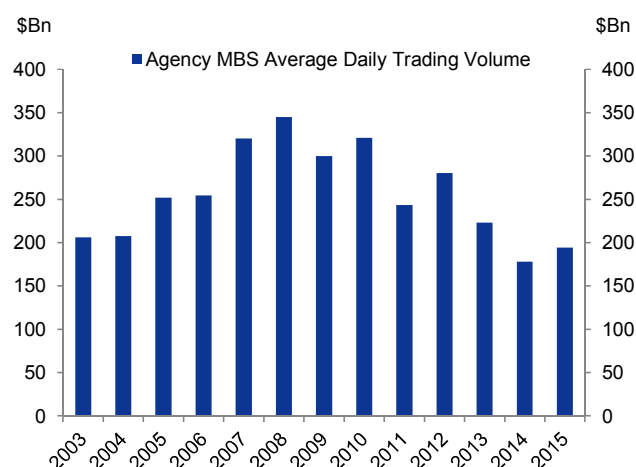
Source: SIFMA.

Exhibit 3: ...while Treasury debt outstanding rose sharply



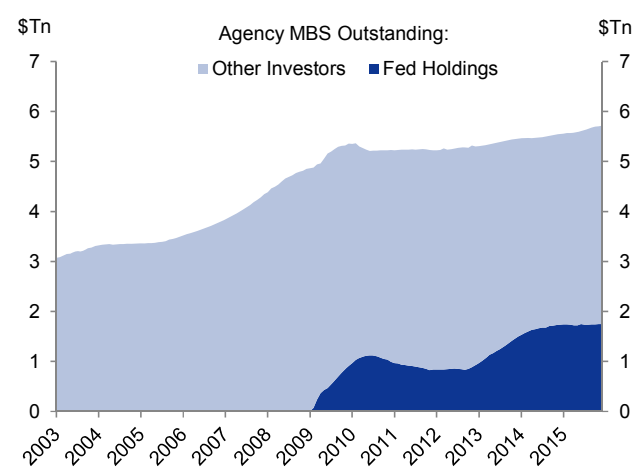
Source: Treasury Department and Federal Reserve.

Exhibit 4: Agency MBS trading volumes declined...



Source: SIFMA.

Exhibit 5: ...when Fed holdings of agency MBS increased

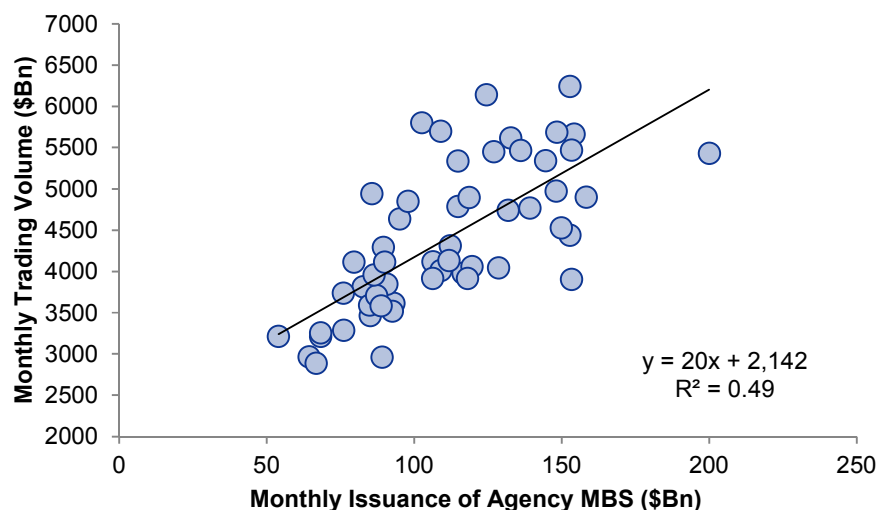


Source: eMBS and Federal Reserve.

Third, issuance matters. In many fixed income markets, there is a close link between the gross issuance of securities and trading volumes. This link is partially mechanical since newly issued bonds need to be traded to reach investors. But the relationship can go beyond this mechanical link: investors often take the opportunity to adjust their portfolios when adding newly issued bonds, generating rippling effects on trading volumes. Exhibit 6 shows a large and strong correlation between monthly gross issuance and monthly trading volumes in the agency MBS market. When measuring market liquidity using trading volumes, we need to adjust for gross issuance because lower trading volumes driven by lower issuance are not indicative of worsening liquidity conditions.

Exhibit 6: Trading volumes rise when issuance increases

Monthly gross issuance and monthly trading volumes of agency MBS, 2011-2015

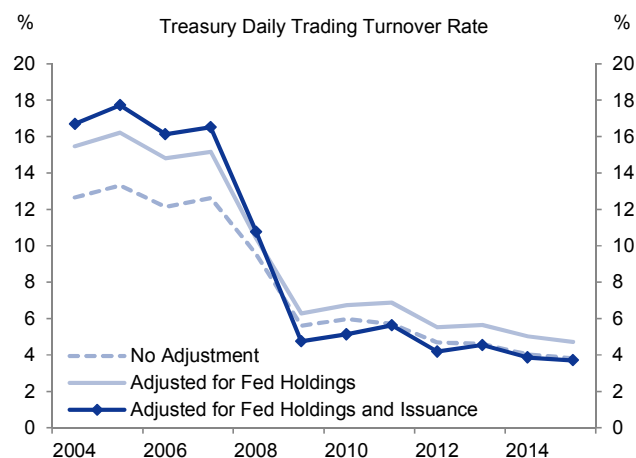


Source: eMBS, FINRA TRACE, and Goldman Sachs Global Investment Research.

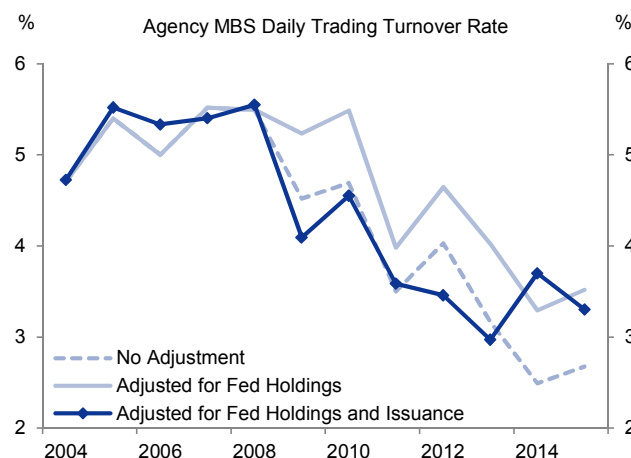
Large decline in turnover post-crisis, small decline more recently

For reasons explained above, we examine daily average trading turnover rate adjusted for Fed holdings and issuance. We conduct our analysis on both annual and monthly trading volume data. The two sets of analysis have advantages and disadvantages: the annual data are less frequent but cover both pre-crisis and post-crisis periods. The monthly data only start in mid-2011 but are more frequent and timely.

Exhibits 7 and 8 show the results from the annual data. While taking Fed holdings and changes in gross issuance into consideration makes a difference, the broad conclusion remains similar. Turnover rates decline for both Treasuries and agency MBS from pre-crisis to post-crisis. The drop in turnover rates in the Treasury market was most pronounced during the crisis years, with the adjusted daily turnover rate falling from 17% in 2007 to 5% in 2009. The drop in turnover rates was more gradual in the agency MBS market, with the adjusted daily turnover rate drifting from ~6% in 2008 to ~3% in 2013. Over the past few years, the annual data show that turnover rates have been relatively stable in both markets once Fed holdings and gross issuance are controlled for. This suggests that most of the liquidity pullback in the fixed income market may have taken place during the years immediately after the onset of the financial crisis.

Exhibit 7: A sharp decline in Treasury turnover rates

Source: SIFMA, Federal Reserve, Treasury Department, and Goldman Sachs Global Investment Research.

Exhibit 8: A gradual drift lower in agency MBS turnover

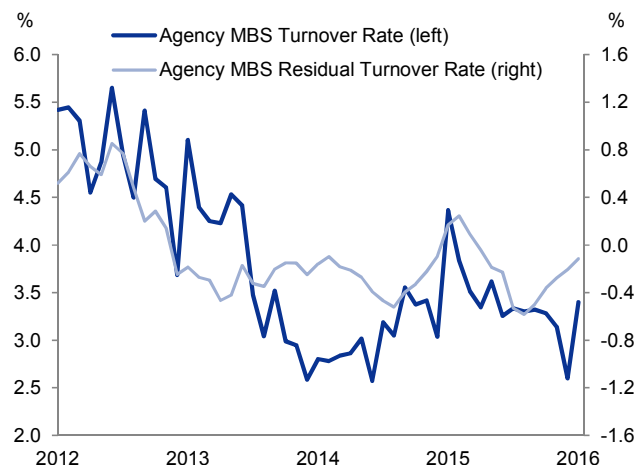
Source: SIFMA, Federal Reserve, eMBS, and Goldman Sachs Global Investment Research.

Exhibits 9 and 10 display the results from the monthly data. While the unadjusted daily trading turnover rate in the agency MBS market fell from 5% in 2012 to 3% in 2014 and 2015, we estimate that Fed holdings and changes in gross issuance explain two thirds of the drop. This is consistent with the finding from the analysis of the annual data: the decline in turnover rates from pre-taper tantrum to post-taper tantrum is small compared to the decline from pre-crisis to post-crisis. Over the past two years, liquidity conditions measured by turnover rates appeared to be little changed in the agency MBS market.

By contrast, turnover rates in the CMBS market has continued to decline. While the unadjusted daily trading turnover rate was 0.3% in 2012 and 2013, it averaged 0.2% in 2015. Because the Fed did not buy CMBS and because turnover rates do not have a strong correlation with issuance in the CMBS market, the adjusted series (not shown here) depicts an almost identical picture.

Exhibit 9: Agency MBS turnover was stable in 2015...

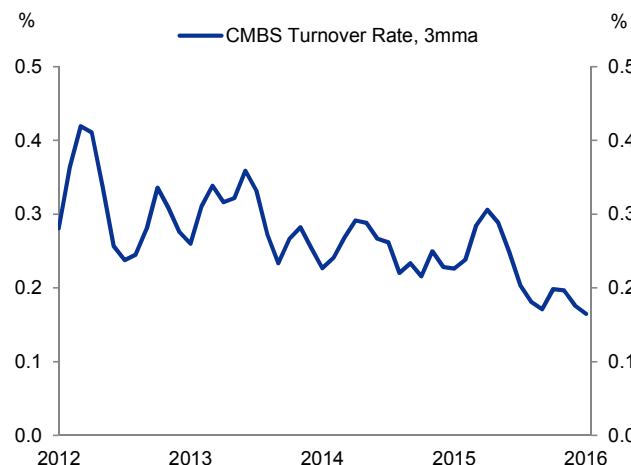
Residual turnover rate is the regression residual of trading volumes on issuance divided by non-Fed holdings



Source: FINRA TRACE, eMBS, Federal Reserve, and Goldman Sachs Global Investment Research.

Exhibit 10: ...while CMBS turnover rate continued to decline in 2015

Unadjusted CMBS turnover rate, 3-month moving average



Source: FINRA TRACE, Trepp, and Goldman Sachs Global Investment Research.

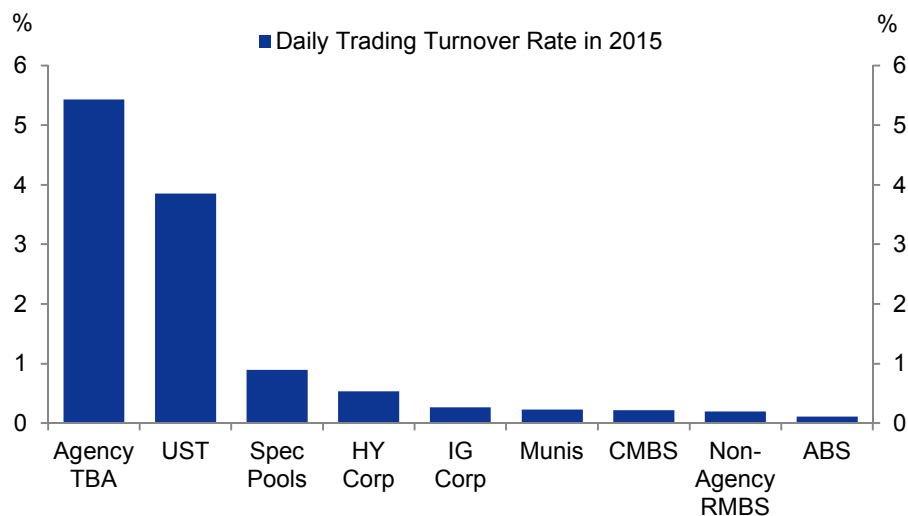
Liquid assets are poised to gain in an increasingly illiquid market

To be sure, market liquidity has multiple dimensions and is difficult to measure. A liquid market should be able to execute large trades within a short period of time at tight bid-ask spreads. Many aspects of liquidity, including depth of the market and the immediacy of the execution, are not observed by researchers. Even in cases when we do observe aspects of liquidity such as bid-ask spreads, the interpretation of the data is not straightforward: bid-ask spreads may narrow when liquidity dries up if only the easiest trades are being executed.

Similarly, measuring market liquidity using trading volume data are subject to many caveats. For example, other drivers affect trading volumes in addition to liquidity conditions. It is well known that trading volumes tend to pick up when market volatility is high. This may be why our adjusted daily turnover rates have been rising for high yield corporate bonds over the past year despite the fact that trading in the corporate bond market is increasingly difficult.

That said, we think that trading turnover rates are helpful in gauging market liquidity when combined with other measures. Our analysis above provides additional evidence that liquidity conditions deteriorated post-crisis in the fixed income markets. While market liquidity has stabilized for some asset classes, liquidity conditions have continued to worsen for other products (e.g., CMBS). Our conversations with clients have left us convinced that the lack of liquidity in the market has been weighing on investment and asset allocation decisions. To the extent that concerns over market liquidity are here to stay, we think agency MBS are poised to gain from its liquidity advantages going forward (Exhibit 11). This is another reason why we do not expect significant widening in mortgage spreads in 2016.

Exhibit 11: The agency TBA market has a higher daily turnover rate than US Treasuries
Average daily trading turnover rate in 2015, unadjusted for Fed holdings or issuance



Source: FINRA TRACE, eMBS, FRBNY, Barclays, SIFMA, CoreLogic, and Goldman Sachs Global Investment Research.

Hui Shan, Marty Young and Spencer Rogers

Disclosure Appendix

Reg AC

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