

Intergenerational Redistribution in the Great Recession*

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Abstract

The Great Recession saw sharp drops in labor earnings and in asset prices. How were the welfare losses from these declines distributed across different age groups? To answer this question we construct a stochastic overlapping-generations general equilibrium model in which households are subject to aggregate shocks that affect both earnings and asset valuations. A calibrated version of the model predicts that younger cohorts fare better than older cohorts when the equilibrium decline in the price of risky assets is large relative to the decline in wages. This finding emerges since the old partially rely on sales of risky assets to finance consumption, whereas the young accumulate wealth for life cycle reasons, and now purchase assets at depressed prices. In a calibrated version of our model, aggregate net worth declines by 26.8% relative to trend, consistent with the experience of the U.S. economy. Average labor incomes decline 9.8%, but young households face even larger earnings declines. The model predicts that the Great Recession implied modest average welfare losses for households in the 20-29 age group, but very large welfare losses of around 10% of lifetime consumption for households aged 60 and older.

Keywords: Great Recession; Overlapping generations; Asset prices; Aggregate risk

JEL classification: E21, D31, D58, D91

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1 Introduction

The Great Recession was the largest contraction in the United States since the Great Depression. Aggregate output and household incomes fell nearly ten percent below trend, and the prices of risky financial as well as real assets –especially stocks and real estate– declined almost three times as much as incomes. The goal of this paper is to explore the welfare consequences of a rare but severe and long-lasting recession such as the Great Recession that features a sharp fall in labor earnings and a collapse in asset prices. Our main objective is to study how the welfare costs of such a recession vary across different age groups.

We argue that the welfare effects of large aggregate shocks are unevenly distributed across different economically active generations. We document empirically that young households have little financial wealth, relative to their labor income, while older households are asset rich but have little human wealth, measured as the present discounted value of future labor income. In addition, young households who buy assets at depressed prices may gain from future asset price appreciation, while older households close to the end of the life cycle may die before prices can recover. A steep fall in asset prices therefore likely has more serious welfare implications for older households.

To empirically underpin our analysis, in the next section we use data from the Survey of Consumer Finances (SCF) to document how labor income and net worth vary over the life cycle. We confirm that older households indeed hold the vast majority of real and financial assets, whereas the young are financial wealth poor but human wealth rich. The same SCF data are then used to estimate the net worth losses associated with the decline in asset prices during the Great Recession, again focusing on how these losses vary with household age. To do so, we decompose net worth into different asset and liability classes, and impute losses by applying asset-class-specific price deflators to age-group-specific portfolios. Since we wish to emphasize that the asset price declines have been rather persistent, we focus on age-specific declines in overall net worth between the middle of 2007 and an average of the 2009–2013 period, rather than on the even sharper (but fairly transitory) decline in stock prices between mid 2007 and early 2009. We find that the average household experienced a decline in net worth of \$116,500 during this period. These losses were heavily concentrated among older age groups: households aged 60–69 lost \$197,000 on average.

These empirical observations suggest that the welfare losses from large economic downturns are unevenly distributed across different age groups in the population. However, a more complete welfare analysis requires forecasts for the future evolution of labor income and asset prices, and an understanding of how agents will optimally adjust savings and portfolio choice behavior in response

to expected future wage and price changes. In the remainder of the paper, we therefore construct a stochastic general equilibrium model with overlapping generations and large aggregate shocks that affect both wages and endogenous asset prices. This model is designed with the explicit purpose of representing well the co-movement of incomes and asset prices in the Great Recession, and we use a version of the model calibrated to aggregate and micro data in 2007 to assess the distributional consequences of this specific severe macroeconomic downturn.¹ One question of particular interest that we can ask within the context of this model is whether young people conceivably benefit from becoming economically active in the midst of a large recession rather than in normal times.

The answers to these distributional questions crucially depend on the size of the decline in equilibrium risky asset prices, relative to the decline in income, in response to a negative aggregate shock. In the model, if middle-aged households have a strong incentive to sell their assets in the downturn (e.g., because they strongly value smooth consumption profiles), then equilibrium asset prices decline more strongly than income. This in turn benefits younger generations who buy these assets at low prices, potentially compensating them for the fall in earnings they experience. At the same time, we will present empirical evidence that younger households experience disproportionately large earnings losses in recessions, an observation that we will ensure holds true in our quantitative model as well.² Thus, the overall allocation of welfare losses from a recession depends crucially on the quantitative importance of asset price risk, the age differences in the exposure to this risk, and the age differences in the direct effect of recessions on labor income.

One challenge we face is to account simultaneously for the massive decline in the price of risky assets and a relatively constant real risk free interest rate during the Great Recession. We interpret this pattern as reflecting an increase in the equilibrium risk premium, and associate a model Great Recession with an increase in aggregate risk, in addition to a decline in labor incomes and dividends.³ In particular, when the model economy enters the Great Recession-like state, a Great Depression-like event becomes a possibility. This time variation in aggregate risk activates a strong precautionary demand for risk-free bonds which supports bond prices at the same time that risky

¹Note that the model is not designed to shed light on the underlying *causes* of the Great Recession. In addition, although we construct and calibrate the model with the Great Recession of the last decade in mind, its implied strong co-movement between incomes and risky asset prices is broadly consistent with the finding by Barro and Ursua 2008, Tables C1 and C2, that in *large* recessions, for the limited observations for the U.S. and for a larger sample of international large recessions, output and stock prices typically fall together. At the same time, as our calibration will make clear, the objective of the model is *not* to rationalize asset price dynamics of all classes of risky assets during typical moderate business cycles.

²The severe and persistent (over a decade) earnings losses of the young we model are consistent with the empirical literature that studies the labor market outcomes of young cohorts in deep recessions (see, e.g., Kahn 2010, Oreopoulos, von Wachter, and Heisz 2012, and Schwandt and von Wachter 2017).

³Bloom (2014) documents that macro uncertainty indeed rises strongly in recessions.

asset prices collapse. For plausible probabilities of a Great Depression the model delivers empirically realistic dynamics for the prices of both riskless and risky asset prices, making it a suitable laboratory for quantifying their welfare implications. At the same time it broadly rationalizes the age variation in portfolio composition observed in the SCF: older model households endogenously hold relatively safe portfolios coming into the Great Recession precisely because they are relatively asset-rich and human-wealth poor, and thus especially exposed to asset price fluctuations.

After having argued that our model economy paints an empirically plausible picture of the Great Recession along its key asset pricing and portfolio dimensions we turn to the normative evaluation of this event. In terms of welfare, in our benchmark model deep recessions like the Great Recession are associated with massive welfare losses for older households (in the order of 10% of remaining lifetime consumption), but much smaller losses (approximately 1% of lifetime consumption) for the young. In an alternative version of the model that *abstracts* from the fact that young households are disproportionately negatively affected in their labor earnings in the Great Recession (losing 14.3% of earnings, relative to a population average of 9.8%), the youngest age group in fact enjoys higher lifetime utility if it becomes economically active during the recession.

Our paper builds on two broad strands of the literature. First, methodologically, we use a stochastic overlapping generations (OLG) model with endogenous portfolio choice to study the implications of aggregate shocks for asset prices and intergenerational redistribution. The literature that analyzes asset prices and portfolio choice in stochastic life cycle economies includes Labadie (1986), Huffman (1987), Ríos-Rull (1994), Storesletten, Telmer, and Yaron (2004, 2007), Constantinides, Donaldson, and Mehra (2002), Kubler and Schmedders (2013), and, with a focus on housing, Piazzesi and Schneider (2012), Corbae and Quintin (2015), as well as Kaplan, Mitman, and Violante (2017). Ríos-Rull (1996) investigates the properties of business cycles in this class of models, while Ball and Mankiw (2007), Smetters (2006), Krueger and Kubler (2004, 2006), Miyazaki, Saito, and Yamada (2009), Campbell and Nosbusch (2007), and Hasanhodzic and Kotlikoff (2017) analyze the allocation of aggregate consumption risk across different generations.

Second, in terms of economic substance, we study the distributional impact of a large shock to aggregate output and asset prices, focusing on the Great Recession as our application. Hur (2013), Peterman and Sommer (2014) and Menno and Oliviero (2016) also investigate the consequences of the Great Recession in life-cycle models, but focus, respectively, on the roles of borrowing constraints, social security, and house prices and mortgage debt for the distribution of welfare losses. Related, a number of papers study the distributional consequences across age cohorts of other types of large economy-wide shocks. Our analysis is similar in spirit to the study of Doepke

and Schneider (2006a,b) who focus on the inflationary episode of the 1970s and, to a lesser extent, to the study of Meh, Ríos-Rull, and Terajima (2010). Other work employs OLG models to investigate the impact of large swings in the demographic structure of the population on factor and asset prices, as well as on the welfare of different age cohorts. Examples include Attanasio, Kitao, and Violante (2007), Krueger and Ludwig (2007), and Ríos-Rull (2001).

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. In Section 2 we present the life-cycle facts on labor income, net worth, and portfolio allocations that motivate our quantitative analysis and that we use later to calibrate the model. In Section 3 we set up our model and define a recursive competitive equilibrium. Section 4 studies a simple three period version of our model in which the key asset price mechanism can be analyzed in the most transparent way. Section 5 is devoted to the calibration of the full quantitative model, and Section 6 reports the results from our thought experiment. In Section 7 we discuss the robustness of our findings to alternative parameterizations and modelling assumptions. Section 8 concludes. Details of the computational approach, proofs, and additional theoretical results are relegated to the Appendix.

2 Data

In this section we document the life-cycle profiles for labor income, net worth, and portfolio composition that motivate our focus on heterogeneity along the age dimension and that will also serve as inputs for the calibration of the quantitative model. The need for detailed data on household portfolios leads us to use the Survey of Consumer Finances (SCF) as our primary data source. The SCF is the best source of micro data on the assets and debts of US households.⁴ The survey is conducted every three years, with the most recent surveys conducted in 2007, 2010, and 2013.

The 2007 survey captures the pre-recession peak in asset prices, and we use it to construct life-cycle profiles for labor income, total income, assets, debts, and net worth in the pre-Great-Recession state in Table 1. These profiles are constructed by averaging (using sample weights) across households partitioned into 10-year age groups. We divide total income into an asset income component and a residual non-asset-income component labeled labor income.⁵ We measure net

⁴One advantage of the survey is that it over samples wealthy households, using a list based on IRS data. Because the SCF weighting scheme adjusts for higher non-response rates among wealthier households, it delivers higher estimates for average income and wealth, compared to other household surveys, such as the Current Population Survey (CPS) or the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID).

⁵Asset income is defined as interest or dividend income (minus interest payment on debts), income from capital gains and asset sales, one-third of income from sole proprietorship other business or farm, and an imputation for rents from owner-occupied housing. We set these imputed rents equal to the value of primary residence times the rate of return on all other assets. This rate of return is computed as asset income (excluding imputed rents) divided

worth as the value of all financial and non financial assets, less the value of all liabilities.⁶

From Table 1 we observe that in 2007 average nominal household income in the SCF was \$83,430, while average household net worth was \$555,660, for a net worth to income ratio of 6.66.⁷ Average household assets amounted to \$659,000, with an average rate of return of 3.1%. Average household debts came to \$103,300, with an average interest rate on debts of 6.4%. The share of net asset income in total income was 16%. Young households had negative net asset income, despite having positive net worth, reflecting the higher average interest rate paid on debts relative to the rate earned on assets.

Table 1: INCOME AND WEALTH OVER THE LIFE CYCLE (2007 SCF, \$1,000)

Age of Head	Total Income	Labor Income	Asset Income	Assets	Debts	Net Worth
All	83.43	70.07	13.36	659.00	103.34	555.66
20-29	38.83	39.68	-0.85	130.66	53.30	77.36
30-39	69.83	68.68	1.15	335.87	136.12	199.75
40-49	93.40	84.97	8.43	598.21	132.62	465.59
50-59	117.97	99.56	18.41	959.77	133.24	826.53
60-69	109.06	76.15	32.90	1,156.96	104.10	1,052.86
70+	57.56	34.46	23.11	756.76	28.48	728.28

Household income follows the familiar hump shape over the life cycle, while net worth peaks somewhat later. For 20- to 29-year-old, average net worth is 1.9 times average labor income, while for households aged 70 and older, the corresponding ratio is 21.1. Thus, the old are much more exposed to fluctuations in asset prices than the young, and therefore endured much larger losses in net worth when asset prices collapsed in the Great Recession. We will ensure, through an appropriate calibration, that the life-cycle patterns of labor income and net worth in our structural

by aggregate assets (excluding the value of primary residences and the value of vehicles).

Labor income is all other income: wage and salary income, two-thirds of income from sole proprietorship other business or farm, unemployment and workers' compensation, child support or alimony, income from social security other pensions or annuities, and income from other sources. Since labor income includes social security and defined benefit pension income, even retired households will have non-trivial labor income, according to our definition.

⁶Our SCF-based measure of net worth is a comprehensive measure of household wealth. It excludes the present value of future pensions associated with defined benefit private pension plans and social security. Recall, however, that the pension income associated with these forms of wealth is part of our labor income measure. Thus, our calibration will capture how these programs impact discretionary savings.

⁷Since income questions refer to the previous calendar year, while questions about wealth are contemporaneous, we adjust income measures for CPI inflation between 2006 and 2007.

OLG model are identical to the empirical profiles documented here.

While Table 1 suggests large losses for older households from a slump in asset prices, the risk composition of net worth also varies substantially with age. To accurately estimate the losses in asset valuations by age group, we therefore further decompose portfolios by age group and examine the relative price changes across different asset classes. In Table 2 we decompose total net worth into risky net worth and safe net worth, where we define risky net worth as the value of stocks, residential real estate, non corporate business, and non-residential property. We define safe net worth as the value of all other assets, less all debts.⁸ In aggregate, risky net worth constitutes 93.9% of aggregate net worth. However, among 30- to 39-year-old, the corresponding ratio is 140.4%, while among those aged 70 or older, it is only 79.2%. These three ratios reflect three facts: (i) in the aggregate, net household holdings of safe assets are very small, (ii) younger households are short in safe assets, because they tend to have substantial mortgage debt (classified as riskless liability) and only small holdings of riskless (and risky) financial assets, and (iii) older households have little debt and lots of assets, including a significant position in riskless financial assets.

Table 2: PORTFOLIO SHARES AS A PERCENTAGE OF NET WORTH (2007 SCF)

Age of Head	(1) Stocks	(2) Res. real estate	(3) Noncorp. bus.	(4) Nonres. prop.	(5) Risky NW	(6) Bonds + CDs	(7) Cars	(8) Other assets	(9) Debts	(10) Safe NW
All	30.28	46.99	12.87	3.80	93.95	16.98	3.45	4.23	-18.60	6.05
20-29	13.20	77.67	43.31	1.28	135.46	13.66	15.26	4.51	-68.90	-35.46
30-39	26.27	96.47	12.73	4.97	140.44	13.80	9.73	4.19	-68.15	-40.44
40-49	30.41	57.62	12.55	3.81	104.38	15.17	4.44	4.49	-28.48	-4.38
50-59	32.70	42.40	13.53	3.72	92.35	17.02	2.79	3.96	-16.12	7.65
60-69	32.17	35.62	13.41	4.12	85.31	17.45	2.40	4.73	-9.89	14.69
70+	27.12	39.76	8.98	3.33	79.18	19.26	1.75	3.72	-3.91	20.82

Risky Net Worth (5) is equal to the sum of columns (1)+(2)+(3)+(4). Safe Net Worth (10) is the sum of columns (6)+(7)+(8)+(9). Total Net Worth is the sum of columns (5)+(10).

The distributions of net worth (Table 1) and its risky versus safe components (Table 2) jointly determine the direct allocation of capital losses across age groups when asset prices fell sharply during the Great Recession. To obtain a sense of the magnitude of age-specific capital losses during this time period we now estimate these losses using aggregate asset-class-specific price series to

⁸Stocks include stocks held directly or indirectly through mutual funds and retirement accounts, and also include closely held equity. The category "Bonds + CDs" includes bonds (directly or indirectly held), cash, transaction accounts, CDs, and the cash value of life insurance.

revalue age-group-specific portfolios.⁹

To carry out this revaluation exercise we assume that 2007 SCF portfolios reflect the distribution of household net worth in the second quarter of 2007. We then revalue portfolios for each age group, and for each successive quarter, as follows. We price stock wealth using the Wilshire 5000 Index (the version that excludes reinvested dividends). We value residential real estate using the Case-Shiller National Home Price Index, which is a quarterly repeat-sales-based index. We price non-residential property using the Moody's/REAL Commercial Property Price Index, which is a monthly repeat-sales-based index for the prices of apartments, industrial property, commercial property, and retail property. We price non-corporate business wealth using Flow of Funds data.¹⁰ These asset price series are all nominal. To turn nominal into real price declines, we employ the GDP deflator published by the BEA.

Table 3 applies these real price changes to the life-cycle profiles for aggregate net worth and its decomposition outlined in Tables 1 and 2. Here we report average capital losses over the 20 quarter period 2009Q1-2013Q4. We average over a five year period to emphasize the impact of *persistent asset price declines* rather than the sharp but relatively transitory decline in stock prices observed in late 2008 and early 2009.

Table 3: CAPITAL LOSSES BY AGE GROUP

Inflation-adjusted capital losses from 2007:2 to 2009:1-2013:4 (\$1,000, 2007)								
Age of head	Stocks	Res. real estate	Noncorp. bus.	Nonres. prop.	Total	Total / net worth (%)	Total / income (%)	Total losses to 2009Q1
All	30.6	64.4	15.1	6.5	116.5	21.0	139.6	154.5
20-29	1.9	14.8	7.1	0.3	24.0	31.1	61.9	24.5
30-39	9.5	47.5	5.4	3.0	65.4	32.8	93.7	73.0
40-49	25.7	66.1	12.3	5.4	109.6	23.5	117.3	139.8
50-59	49.1	86.4	23.6	9.4	168.5	20.4	142.8	232.3
60-69	61.5	92.4	29.8	13.3	197.0	18.7	180.6	278.9
70+	35.9	71.4	13.8	7.4	128.5	17.6	223.2	173.9

The first row of Table 3 reports average inflation-adjusted losses on various components of net

⁹In Section 6.7 we compare the age distribution for net worth across the 2007, 2010, and 2013 waves of the SCF. However, changes in the cross-sectional age distributions over time reflect both the direct effect of asset price declines but also the endogenous effects of changes in saving rates in response to those capital losses. Our revaluation exercise here isolates the first effect.

¹⁰In particular, the Flow of Funds reports changes in market values for a variety of asset types by sector. We focus on the asset type "proprietors' investment in unincorporated business" for the household and non-profit sector.

worth. The total loss reported is the sum of the losses on all risky assets. The average household saw a price-change-induced decline in the value of their risky assets of \$116,500 between 2007:2 and the 2009:1-2013:4 average, which amounted to 21 percent of 2007:2 average net worth or 140 percent of 2007 average annual income. Over half of these capital losses are attributable to a decline in house prices. The trough for house prices was 2012Q1, by which date inflation-adjusted house prices had declined 31.1 percent. The trough for stock prices was 2009Q1, when inflation-adjusted prices were 47.7 percent below their 2007Q2 value.¹¹

The remaining rows of Table 3 show that risky asset capital losses varied widely by age. Younger households lost much less, while those in the 60-69 age group lost the most: \$197,000 on average, or almost twice the average annual income for this age group. At the same time, differences in portfolio composition were large enough to generate substantial age variation in returns. In particular, because younger households were more leveraged, they lost more as a percentage of their net worth: 30- to 39-year-old lost 32.8 percent of net worth, while households older than 70 lost only 17.6 percent. In other words, absent age variation in portfolios, the losses experienced by younger households would have been smaller, and those experienced by older households would have been even larger.

Table 4: AGGREGATE CAPITAL LOSSES

Aggregate Wealth Losses from 2007:2 to 2009:1–2013:4					
Risky asset losses (\$1,000)			Net worth loss	GDPpc loss	
Nominal	Real	Real rel. trend	rel. trend (%)	rel. trend (%)	
90.3	116.5	148.8	26.8	9.8	

Our goal is to measure the Great Recession declines in incomes and asset prices in a consistent fashion. We measure the Great Recession income decline as the deviation of real GDP per capita from trend, where trend GDP per capita grows at a constant 2 percent rate from 2007Q2 (see Section 5). Table 4 presents aggregate asset price declines measured relative to the same 2 percent growth trend, in addition to nominal and real price declines. As expected, asset price declines are smaller measured in nominal terms, and larger when measured relative to a growth trend. Our calibration will target the 26.8 percent observed decline in the value of net worth relative to a 2 percent trend.¹² This target is appropriate if in the absence of a recession one would expect asset

¹¹By the end of 2015, 8.5 years after the onset of the asset price decline in the Great Recession aggregate real risky asset values had fully recovered, with real stock prices 23.5 percent above and real house prices 15.0 percent below their 2007Q2 values. This timing accords well with the 10 year decline in asset prices in our model. Time series for real price changes by asset type relative to 2007:2 are reported in Table A-4 in Appendix G.

¹²To properly quantify the decline in the total value of net worth requires making an additional assumption about

prices to grow at roughly the same rate as GDP per capita.¹³ This 26.8 percent decline compares to a 9.8 percent decline in GDP per capita, relative to trend, over the same period.¹⁴

3 The Model

The facts documented above guide our modelling choices. First, the substantial heterogeneity by household age in labor income and net worth requires an overlapping-generations life-cycle model. Our general equilibrium approach provides a theoretical link between the dynamics of income, consumption, and savings on the one hand, and asset prices on the other. Second, empirical portfolio allocations between risky and riskless assets display significant age heterogeneity, which translates into age variation in the sensitivity of net worth to aggregate shocks. This motivates us to consider models with both risky and safe assets. Third, the direct effect of recessions on labor income varies across age groups, largely reflecting the fact that younger workers are disproportionately likely to become unemployed.¹⁵ This leads us to a model specification in which recessions change not only average earnings, but also the distribution of earnings by age.

3.1 Technology

A representative firm operates a Cobb-Douglas technology that takes as inputs a fixed factor K and labor L , and produces as output a non-storable consumption good Y . The firm's productivity varies with an aggregate shock z which drives aggregate fluctuations. Thus,

$$Y = z K^\theta L^{1-\theta},$$

where $\theta \in (0, 1)$ is capital's share of output.

Aggregate productivity z has finite support Z and evolves over time according to a Markov chain with transition matrix $\Gamma_{z,z'}$.

the prices of the safe components of net worth (bonds, vehicles, other assets, and debts). If the aggregate value of safe assets (less debts) grows in real terms at the economy's trend growth rate, then the decline in the real value of risky assets (relative to trend) as a share of net worth is equal to the percentage decline (relative to trend) in the value of net worth. Thus, this assumption justifies targeting an aggregate asset price decline of 26.8% percent in our calibration.

¹³The real price of houses doubled between 1975 and 2006, consistent with a 2 percent trend annual growth rate (see Davis and Heathcote 2007, Figure 1). Real stock prices rose much faster over the same period, with the Wilshire 5000 Price Index averaging 5.5 percent annual growth.

¹⁴Relative to a 2 percent growth trend, the trough in aggregate asset values was reached in the fourth quarter of 2011. At the end of 2015 asset values were still 14 percent below trend.

¹⁵In Section 7.2 we will document the extent of age variation in labor income declines in the Great Recession.

We normalize $K = 1$. One interpretation of our assumption that capital K is in fixed supply is that K stands in for nonreproducible land or intangible capital. By making the stock of capital fixed, any changes in the demand for assets must translate into movements in asset prices rather than changes in the quantity of capital. This property is important given our focus on the welfare effects of large recessions that are accompanied by large asset price declines. In the standard frictionless business cycle model, by contrast, capital and consumption are the same good, and thus that model cannot generate any movements in the relative price of capital.

3.2 Endowments

Households live for I periods and then die with certainty. Thus, the economy is populated by I distinct age cohorts at any point in time. Each age cohort is composed of identical households. In each period of their lives, households are endowed with one unit of time supplied to the market inelastically. Their age- and aggregate-shock-dependent labor productivity profile is given by $\{\varepsilon_i(z)\}_{i=1}^I$. Indexing the productivity profile to the aggregate shock allows us to capture heterogeneity across age groups in the impact of recessions on labor income. We normalize units so that $\sum_{i=1}^I \varepsilon_i(z) = 1$ for all $z \in Z$. Thus, aggregate labor supply is constant and equal to $L = 1$. This normalization also implies that aggregate output is given by $Y(z) = z$ for all $z \in Z$.

Labor markets are competitive, and therefore the economy-wide wage per labor efficiency unit supplied is equal to the marginal product of labor from the production technology: $w(z) = (1-\theta)z$. Note that because the aggregate supplies of capital and labor are exogenous, and the labor share of income is constant, fluctuations in z need not be interpreted simply as neutral shocks to multi-factor productivity: they could equally well capture fluctuations in capital or labor productivity, or capital or labor utilization rates. Thus, our model is consistent with a range of alternative theories regarding the fundamental sources of business cycles.

3.3 Preferences

Households have standard time-separable preferences over stochastic consumption streams $\{c_i\}_{i=1}^I$ that can be represented by¹⁶

$$E \left[\sum_{i=1}^I \prod_{j=1}^i \beta_j u(c_i) \right],$$

where β_i is the time discount factor between age $i - 1$ and i (we normalize $\beta_1 = 1$). Age variation in the discount factor stands in for unmodeled changes in family size and composition, age-specific mortality risk, and any other factors that generate age variation in the marginal utility of consumption. We will calibrate the profile $\{\beta_i\}_{i=1}^I$ so that our economy replicates the life-cycle profile for net worth documented in SCF data in Section 2.

Expectations $E(\cdot)$ are taken with respect to the underlying stochastic process governing aggregate risk. Finally, the period utility function is of the constant relative risk aversion form

$$u(c) = \frac{c^{1-\gamma} - 1}{1 - \gamma},$$

where γ is the coefficient of relative risk aversion, and $1/\gamma$ is the intertemporal elasticity of substitution (IES). The case $\gamma = 1$ corresponds to log-utility.

3.4 Financial Markets

Agents trade financial assets to transfer resources over time. We consider two alternative market structures that differ in the set of assets that can be traded. In the benchmark market structure, households can trade both a risk-free bond and leveraged risky equity, and portfolio choice is *endogenous*. Denote by λ_i the share of savings allocated by a household of age i to stocks.¹⁷ Our

¹⁶By studying a standard OLG model we abstract from bequest motives. The implications of introducing bequests would depend on how they were modelled. Introducing a warm-glow bequest motive linked to the *value* of bequests would imply similar welfare consequences of recessions to those in our model without bequests. Introducing bequests motivated by perfect inter-generational altruism would connect past, present, and future cohorts in a single infinitely-lived dynasty, thereby rendering the notion of redistribution across generations meaningless.

¹⁷In Appendix J we demonstrate that our model is isomorphic to a model in which households can also invest in residential real estate, as long as a) housing is not subject to trading frictions (such as adjustment costs or indivisibilities), b) there exists a competitive rental market, and c) households have Cobb-Douglas preferences over nondurable consumption and housing services. In that extended model, stock and house prices comove positively, as they did in the Great Recession. However, the extended model cannot speak to the experience of the 1970's when the prices of stocks and houses moved in opposite directions (see Piazzesi and Schneider, 2012).

calibrated aggregate shock process will have the property that, conditional on the current state, only two values for next period productivity arise with positive probability; thus the economy with endogenous portfolio choice is equivalent to an economy in which a full set of Arrow securities is traded. We define an equilibrium for the Arrow securities economy in Appendix A, and in Appendix B we describe how to exploit this equivalence in the numerical methods we use to characterize equilibrium allocations. Note that while agents can structure portfolios to insure against aggregate risk in the endogenous portfolios economy, they cannot buy insurance *ex ante* against the date and state in which they become economically active. Thus, aggregate shocks will redistribute between existing and newly active households.

The second market structure also features two assets and an endogenous consumption-savings choice. However, the allocations $\{\lambda_i\}$ of household savings across the two assets are treated as *exogenous* parameters and calibrated to replicate the portfolio composition across risky and riskless assets by age observed in the SCF. Thus, households in this model effectively save in one mutual fund at each age, where the stock versus bond mix in the fund is age varying. We will use this version of our model as a tool for calibrating all model parameters, and as a vehicle for assessing the quantitative importance of age variation in portfolios for our asset pricing and welfare results.

We will define competitive equilibrium recursively. The two alternative market structures differ only with respect to whether the division of household savings between stocks and bonds is specified exogenously or chosen optimally. We will therefore define a recursive competitive equilibrium only once, focusing on the economy with endogenous portfolios.

The aggregate state of the economy is described by the current aggregate shock z and the cross-sectional distribution $A = (A_1, \dots, A_I)$ of shares of beginning of period total wealth, where $\sum_{i=1}^I A_i = 1$. Newborn households enter the economy with zero initial wealth, so $A_1 = 0$. Individual state variables are a household's age i and its individual share of wealth, denoted by a .

The representative firm issues a constant quantity B of risk-free real bonds at a price $q(z, A)$ per unit. Each bond is a promise to pay one unit of the consumption good in the next period. We treat the supply of debt B as an exogenous time- and state-invariant *parameter* of the model. Dividends for the representative firm $d(z, A)$ are then given by aggregate capital income θz plus revenue from debt issuance $q(z, A)B$ less debt repayment B :

$$d(z, A) = \theta z - [1 - q(z, A)] B. \tag{1}$$

Note that returns to equity are risky, while the return to debt is safe and given by the reciprocal of the bond price. The supply of debt B determines the level of leverage in the economy: the higher is B , the more leveraged and risky are stocks. Let $p(z, A)$ denote the ex-dividend price of equity. The aggregate value of start of period wealth is the value of aggregate payments to asset holders in the period, plus the ex-dividend value of equity:

$$W(z, A) = p(z, A) + d(z, A) + B = p(z, A) + \theta z + q(z, A) B,$$

where the second equality follows from the expression for dividends in equation (1).

3.5 Household Problem

Let $y_i(z, A, a)$ and $\lambda_i(z, A, a)$ denote the optimal household policy functions for total savings and for the fraction of savings invested in leveraged equity. Let $c_i(z, A, a)$ and $a'_i(z, A, a, z')$ denote the associated policy functions for consumption and for shares of next period wealth. The dynamic programming problem of the household reads as

$$v_i(z, A, a) = \max_{c, y, \lambda, a'} \left\{ u(c) + \beta_{i+1} \sum_{z' \in Z} \Gamma_{z, z'} v_{i+1}(z', A'(z'), a'(z')) \right\} \quad \text{s.t.} \quad (2)$$

$$c + y = \varepsilon_i(z) w(z) + W(z, A) a \quad (3)$$

$$a' = \frac{\left(\lambda \frac{[p(z', A') + d(z', A')]}{p(z, A)} + (1 - \lambda) \frac{1}{q(z, A)} \right) y}{W(z', A')} \quad (4)$$

$$A' = G(z, A, z'). \quad (5)$$

The first constraint (3) is the household's budget constraint: consumption plus savings must equal labor earnings plus the household's share of start of period wealth.¹⁸ The second constraint (4) is the law of motion for the household's share of individual wealth. This constraint merits some additional explanation. Savings in equity are given by λy , and the gross return on these savings is given by $[p(z', A') + d(z', A')] / p(z, A)$. Savings in bonds are given by $(1 - \lambda)y$, and the gross return on these savings is $1/q(z, A)$. Thus, the numerator on the right-hand side of equation (4) is the gross value of the household portfolio at the beginning of next period. The household's *share* of next period wealth is this value divided by aggregate next period wealth, the denominator.

¹⁸In addition, consumption must be non-negative, and savings at age l must be non-negative.

The third constraint is the law of motion for the wealth distribution, which allows agents to forecast future prices, contingent on the sequence for future productivity. Let $G_i(z, A, z')$ denote the forecast for the share of next period wealth owned by age group i .

Definition 1. *A recursive competitive equilibrium is a value function and policy functions for each age, $v_i(z, A, a)$, $c_i(z, A, a)$, $y_i(z, A, a)$, $a'_i(z, A, a, z')$, $\lambda_i(z, A, a)$, pricing functions $w(z)$, $d(z, A)$, $p(z, A)$, $q(z, A)$, and an aggregate law of motion $G(z, A, z')$ such that:*

1. *Given the pricing functions and the aggregate law of motion, the value functions $\{v_i\}$ solve the recursive problem of the households, and $\{c_i, y_i, a'_i, \lambda_i\}$ are the associated policy functions.*
2. *Wages and dividends satisfy*

$$w(z) = (1 - \theta) z \quad \text{and} \quad d(z, A) = \theta z - [1 - q(z, A)] B.$$

3. *Markets clear*

$$\begin{aligned} \sum_{i=1}^l c_i(z, A, A_i) &= z \\ \sum_{i=1}^l \lambda_i(z, A, A_i) y_i(z, A, A_i) &= p(z, A) \\ \sum_{i=1}^l [1 - \lambda_i(z, A, A_i)] y_i(z, A, A_i) &= B q(z, A). \end{aligned}$$

4. *The law of motion for the distribution of wealth is consistent with equilibrium decision rules*

$$G_1(z, A, z') = 0 \quad \forall z' \tag{6}$$

$$G_{i+1}(z, A, z') = a'_i(z, A, A_i, z'), \quad \forall z', \quad i = 1, \dots, l - 1. \tag{7}$$

4 Developing Intuition: A Three Period Model

In order to develop intuition for the key mechanisms at work in our model, we now consider the special case of a three period economy ($l = 3$) designed to highlight (i) the key determinants of equilibrium asset price movements, relative to movements in output, and (ii) how asset price

movements translate into differential welfare effects across generations.¹⁹ We simplify the environment further by assuming that stocks are the only asset traded ($B = 0$ and $\lambda_i \equiv 0$), and that the aggregate shock takes only two values: $Z = \{z_n, z_r\}$, where z_n denotes normal times, and z_r stands for a Great Recession-like state. Households do not value consumption when young and discount the future at a constant factor $\beta_2 = \beta_3 = \beta$ thereafter. In addition, households are productive only in the first period of their lives ($\varepsilon_1 = 1$ and $\varepsilon_2 = \varepsilon_3 = 0$). Given this set of assumptions, young households buy as many stocks as they can afford, while the old sell all stocks they own. Only the middle-aged make a non-trivial intertemporal decision, namely how many shares to retain for old age. In a recession, lower stock prices have countervailing effects on the middle-aged's decision to trade shares. On the one hand, temporarily low current stock prices offer an incentive to reduce stock sales to exploit higher expected stock returns (the substitution effect). On the other hand, consumption smoothing calls for selling a larger fraction of stocks, since asset sales are the only source of income for this group (the income effect).

We measure the size of the decline in asset prices, relative to the decline in output z , by

$$\xi(A) = \frac{\log(p(z_r, A)/p(z_n, A))}{\log(z_r/z_n)},$$

where prices and thus the elasticity ξ , are functions of the distribution of wealth A . An elasticity of $\xi = 2$, for example, indicates that the percentage decline in asset prices when the economy enters the recession is two times as large as the fall in output.

A 3 period OLG model is the simplest example in which the distribution of wealth A across different generations is a state variable.²⁰ Since young households start their lives with zero asset holdings and the total number of wealth shares has to sum to one, this distribution can be summarized by the share of wealth held by old households, A_3 , which for simplicity we denote by $A_3 = A$. The share of assets owned by middle-aged households is given by $A_2 = 1 - A$.

Consumption of a middle-aged household is given by the wealth they enter the period with net

¹⁹In Section 7.1 we will also use this model to compare our baseline level stationary process for aggregate productivity to an alternative specification featuring shocks to the growth rate.

²⁰An even simpler example is a two-period OLG model. However, all beginning-of-period wealth is then held by the old, and thus this example cannot demonstrate the importance of the wealth distribution for asset prices. Furthermore, in a two-period model only the young make a consumption-savings decision and the young's Euler equation therefore prices assets. Thus asset prices can fall in a recession only if the young's consumption falls in a recession. Because recessionary stock prices declines reflect the fact that the young are taking a hit, the question of whether lower asset prices present the young with an opportunity for welfare gains has an immediate negative answer. In the three period model, in contrast, the middle-aged price assets, and the welfare implications for the young can be positive, as we demonstrate below.

of asset purchases. where $A' = G(z, A)$ is the number of shares purchased. In old age households simply consume the proceeds of their assets. Thus

$$\begin{aligned} c_2(z, A) &= (1 - A)(p(z, A) + \theta z) - G(z, A)p(z, A), \\ c_3(z, A; z', A') &= G(z, A)[p(z', A') + \theta z']. \end{aligned}$$

The optimality condition with respect to asset purchases is the standard Euler equation

$$u' [c_2(z, A)] = \beta \sum_{z'} \Gamma_{z, z'} \frac{[p(z', A') + \theta z']}{p(z, A)} u' [c_3(z, A; z', A')]. \quad (8)$$

The demand for shares by the young, $1 - G(z, A)$, must equal the number of shares that can be purchased with their total labor income $w(z)/p(z) = (1 - \theta)z/p(z)$. Thus,

$$[1 - G(z, A)] p(z, A) = (1 - \theta)z. \quad (9)$$

Equations (8)-(9) jointly determine the equilibrium pricing and policy functions $p(z, A)$, $G(z, A)$.²¹

For *logarithmic utility* we can solve for the recursive competitive equilibrium in closed form, as Appendix D shows.²² In equilibrium, asset prices are proportional to output z ($\xi = 1$), the wealth distribution A does not respond to the aggregate shock, and consumption of all generations moves one for one with the shock. If in addition the aggregate shock is *iid*, then the young (who do not value consumption in this version of the model) are exactly indifferent between being born in a recession versus being born in normal times.²³ Key for this result is that with log utility the young are compensated for their income losses by precisely the same decline in asset values, leaving their future “purchasing power” unchanged. In the data, however, asset prices fell much more than incomes. This points to an inter-temporal elasticity of substitution below one. When households are less willing to substitute consumption over time, they are more tempted to sell assets in the recession state, and a larger price decline is required for them not to do so. In Appendix C we confirm this intuition in the representative agent (RA) version of the model, by showing that with *iid* output levels the asset price elasticity is exactly $\xi^{RA} = \gamma$.

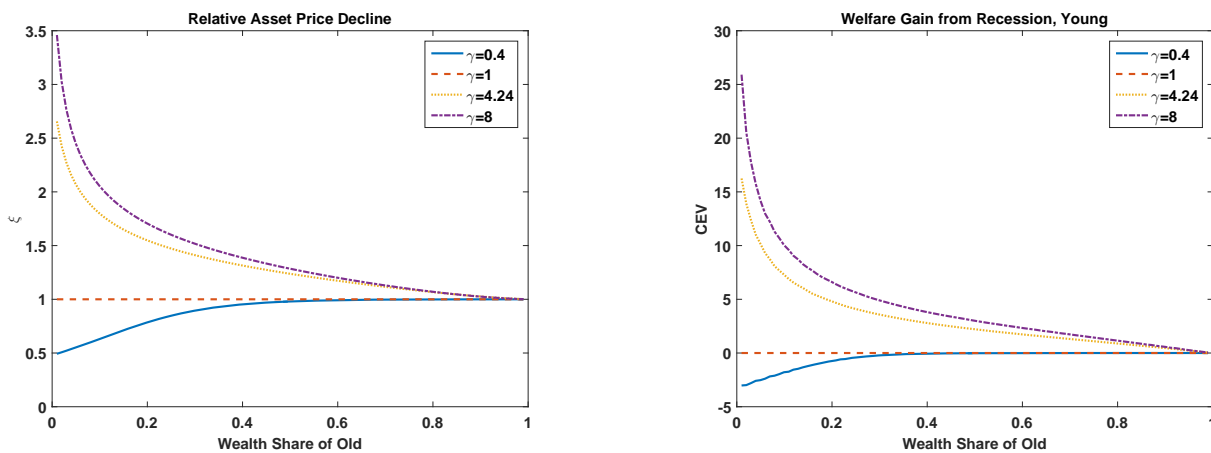
²¹Consumption and welfare at all ages is determined by these equilibrium functions, see Appendix F.1.

²²This result is not specific to the three period example. The appendix provides a full analytical solution of the log-utility case for arbitrarily many generations and for any Markov process for z ,

²³If output is positively serially correlated then the young suffer (mild) welfare losses because a recession today makes welfare losses as middle-aged more likely. The reverse logic applies if z is negatively correlated.

For risk aversion $\gamma \neq 1$ the recursive competitive equilibrium has to be solved numerically. We choose parameter values for (β, θ) and the stochastic process for z consistent with the calibration of the full model in the next section, and display results for various values of $1/\gamma$, the key determinant of asset price volatility.²⁴ The left panel of Figure 1 plots the elasticity of asset prices to output, ξ against A , for $\gamma \in \{0.4, 1, 4.24, 8\}$.

Figure 1: ASSET PRICE DECLINE RELATIVE TO OUTPUT, WELFARE



This figure highlights two key findings. First, the lower is the IES, $1/\gamma$, the larger is the fall in asset prices, relative to output, in the recession. With $\gamma = 1$, asset prices move exactly one for one with output, independent of the wealth distribution, a property we establish analytically in Appendix D. Suppose that $\gamma > 1$, implying a lower IES. If asset prices were to fall only as much as output in the recession, relative to the log-case the middle aged would want to sell more stocks in the recession because they now care more about a smooth consumption profile. But since the middle aged can only sell shares to young, price-inelastic buyers, the price must fall more than in the log-case. Second, the size of asset price movements depends on the wealth distribution A when preferences are not logarithmic. When households are relatively unwilling to tolerate consumption fluctuations over time (i.e. $1/\gamma < 1$) a larger share of wealth in the hands of the middle-aged (a smaller A) translates into greater middle-aged exposure to asset price movements, larger middle-aged asset sales, and thus a larger asset price elasticity ξ .

²⁴Specifically, we choose $\theta = 0.3017$, and a twenty-year time discount factor $\beta = [\prod_{t=1}^J \beta_t]^{2/5}$ (where the β_t are the calibrated age-dependent ten-year time discount factors for the full model). The output loss between normal times and recessions pins down z_r/z_n and is calibrated to 9.84%. Since theoretical asset pricing results for the representative agent model and the two-period OLG model alluded to above can only be established with *iid* shocks, we focus here on this case, and also assume that the two states z_n and z_r are equally likely.

Note that for $\gamma = 4.24$, the calibrated value below, the elasticity of asset prices to output is $\xi = 1.3$ for a wealth distribution ($A = 0.42$) emerging after a long spell of high output. Thus, the asset price elasticity in the three-generation OLG model is lower than in the RA model. Our six-generation quantitative model will generate an intermediate value of $\xi = 2.72$.²⁵

The welfare consequences for young generations of starting their lives in a recession, relative to an expansion, are displayed in the right panel of Figure 1. Welfare is measured as the percentage increase in consumption in all periods of a household's life that a household born in normal times would require to be indifferent to being born in a recession. Positive numbers therefore reflect welfare *gains* from a recession. We observe that the welfare consequences of recessions for the young mirror the elasticity of asset prices to output (left panel), confirming that this elasticity (which in turn is determined by the IES) is the crucial determinant of how welfare losses are distributed across generations. For example, when $\gamma = 4.24$ and $A = 0.42$, the young experience welfare gains from the recession worth 2.69% of lifetime consumption.

The purpose of the simple model was to demonstrate the crucial role of the desire of middle-aged asset owners to smooth consumption through the recession, as measured by the IES. It showed that, because of favorable asset price movements, the youngest generation might experience welfare *gains* from a recession. However, this example stacks the deck in favor of obtaining favorable welfare consequences for the young. First, the young do not value consumption and thus are not directly affected by a decline in *current* aggregate consumption. Second, the labor income decline of the young is no larger than the decline in aggregate income. Third, the middle-aged have no labor income and hold no safe assets, forcing them to bear a disproportionate share of the burden of the recession. To relax these assumptions we now use a realistically calibrated version of the model to deliver estimates of the distribution of welfare consequences from the Great Recession. In this version of model the life-cycle profiles for labor income and wealth are calibrated to match those observed in the 2007 SCF, and the model Great Recession features realistic age-dependent declines in labor income. Households value consumption in all periods of their lives, and all generations make consumption-savings as well as portfolio decisions.

5 Calibration

We think of a model period as being 10 years. Agents are assumed to enter the economy as adults and live for $l = 6$ periods. The set of parameters characterizing households are risk aversion γ ,

²⁵In Appendix E we show in a two period OLG model, as long as the IES $1/\gamma$ is smaller than one, $1 < \xi^{2OLG} < \xi^{RA} = \gamma$.

the life-cycle profile for discount factors $\{\beta_i\}_{i=2}^T$, and the parameters governing labor endowments over the life-cycle profile $\{\varepsilon_i(z)\}_{i=1}^T$. The parameters defining capital's share of income and the partition of this income between bond and stockholders are θ and B . The technology parameters are the support Z and transition probability matrix Γ for the aggregate productivity shock z .

Our broad calibration strategy is to calibrate the aggregate endowment process (Z, Γ) directly from aggregate time series data and to select (θ, B) such that the model reproduces the empirically observed average portfolio share of risky assets and the aggregate wealth to income ratio in the 2007 SCF. We choose the life cycle profiles $\{\beta_i, \varepsilon_i(z)\}$ so that the model-implied life cycle profiles for labor earnings and net worth align with their empirical 2007 counterparts. Finally we set γ so that the decline in asset prices (relative to the fall in per capita income) in a model Great Recession matches that observed in the data. All parameter values are reported in Table 5 below. We now turn to the details of how these values are chosen.

Table 5: PARAMETERS

Preferences and Technology				
$\theta = 0.3017$	$B = 0.0699$	$\gamma = 4.24$		
Aggregate Risk				
$Z = \begin{pmatrix} 1.0000 \\ 0.9016 \\ 0.7109 \end{pmatrix}$	$\Gamma_{z,z'} = \begin{pmatrix} 0.835 & 0.165 & 0.000 \\ 0.793 & 0.000 & 0.207 \\ 1.000 & 0.000 & 0.000 \end{pmatrix}$			
Age Varying Parameters				
Age i	β_i	ε_i (%)	λ_i (%)	$\Delta\varepsilon_i$ (%)
20-29	1.00	75	136	-14.3
30-39	1.19	99	140	-12.6
40-49	1.10	123	104	-10.3
50-59	1.18	144	92	-11.1
60-69	1.09	110	85	-6.0
70+	0.91	50	79	-1.4

5.1 Financial Market Parameters

We use a non stochastic version of the economy, in which the productivity shock is fixed at $z = 1$, to calibrate θ and B . Let $\bar{\lambda}$ denote the aggregate share of risky assets (stocks) in total household net worth. Let \bar{W} denote the aggregate wealth to labor income ratio. Thus,

$$\bar{\lambda} = \frac{\bar{p}}{\bar{p} + \bar{q}B} \text{ and } \bar{W} = \frac{\bar{p} + \bar{q}B}{(1 - \theta)} \quad (10)$$

where \bar{p} and \bar{q} are steady state stock and bond prices.

Let $\bar{R} = 1/\bar{q}$ denote the steady state gross interest rate. In a non stochastic version of the model, the same interest rate \bar{R} must apply to both stocks and bonds for agents to be indifferent about an interior portfolio split. Thus,

$$\bar{R} = \frac{1}{\bar{q}} = \frac{\bar{p} + \theta + \bar{q}B - B}{\bar{p}}. \quad (11)$$

Given three empirical measures for $\bar{\lambda}$ (where risky assets include real estate, as in the empirical section), \bar{W} , and \bar{R} , equations 10 and 11 can be used to solve for \bar{p} , B , and θ . From the 2007 SCF we measure $\bar{\lambda}$ and \bar{W} by averaging across age groups.²⁶

$$\begin{aligned} \bar{\lambda} &= 500.78/545.50 = 0.918 \\ \bar{W} &= 545.50/(10 \times 69.25) = 0.788 \end{aligned}$$

For the interest rate \bar{R} we target an average weighted return across asset classes. Piazzesi, Schneider, and Tuzel (2007) report real returns on safe and risky assets of 0.75% and 4.75% per annum, where the latter is the return on an equally weighted portfolio of stocks returning 6.94% and housing returning 2.52%. Given that our period length is 10 years, this implies

$$\bar{R} = \bar{\lambda} \times 1.0475^{10} + (1 - \bar{\lambda}) \times 1.0075^{10} = 1.5485.$$

Collectively, these values for $\bar{\lambda}$, \bar{W} , and \bar{R} imply that $\theta = 0.3017$ and $B = 0.0699$.

5.2 Aggregate Shocks

The aggregate shock z takes one of three values: $z \in Z = \{z_n, z_r, z_d\}$ The first state, z_n , corresponds to normal times. The second state, $z_r < 1$, is a Great-Recession-like state. The third state, $z_d < z_r$ is a Great-Depression-like state. We wish to stress that since we think of shallow and short recessions as occurring within “normal times,” our model is not designed to explain standard business cycle frequency asset price movements.

We normalize $z_n = 1$. We then set z_r so that transitioning from the normal to the recession

²⁶In our model, each age group is assumed to be of equal size. Thus, given that we will later seek to replicate earnings and net worth for each age group, the appropriate aggregate targets are unweighted averages across age groups. Because these age groups are not of exactly identical size in the SCF, these aggregate targets do not correspond exactly to SCF population averages, but the differences are small.

state involves an output decline of 9.84%. This is the size of the decline in real GDP per capita observed in the US during the Great Recession, defined as the deviation of actual GDP per capita from trend, where we average the deviation over the 20 quarter period 2009Q1-2013Q4, and where trend GDP per capita grows at a constant 2% rate from 2007Q2.²⁷ Recall that we have measured asset price declines in the same way: in real terms, relative to a 2% trend, and averaging losses (relative to 2007Q2) over the same 20 quarter window. We average output and asset price declines over 20 quarters to filter out transitory quarter-to-quarter fluctuations: recall that a period in our model is 10 years. We set z_d so that output in the disaster state is 28.9% below normal, the average deviation of GDP per capita from trend over the 5 year period 1932-1936.²⁸

Since large recessions are rare events, there is limited empirical evidence to identify transition probabilities. To reduce the number of free parameters, we impose four restrictions on the transition probability matrix Γ . We assume that (i) the recession state can only be reached from the normal state ($\Gamma_{r,r} = \Gamma_{d,r} = 0$), (ii) the disaster state can only be reached from the recession state ($\Gamma_{n,d} = \Gamma_{d,d} = 0$). There are two remaining independent transition parameters, the probability of entering a Great Recession, $\Gamma_{n,r}$, and the probability that a Great Recession turns into a Great Depression $\Gamma_{r,d}$. We set these transitions to target estimates of the fraction of time the US economy is in Great-Recession-like and Great-Depression-like states. We estimate these unconditional probabilities using the long-run data from Maddison on GDP per capita over the period 1800 to 2010 (see The Maddison Project 2013). Let Δ_t denote the deviation of GDP per capita from trend in year t . We set two thresholds $\kappa_r < 0$ and $\kappa_d < \kappa_r$, and define the US economy as being in the recession state in year t if $\Delta_t \in [\kappa_d, \kappa_r]$ and as being in the disaster state if $\Delta_t < \kappa_d$. Deviations are relative to a Hodrick-Prescott trend, with smoothing parameter $\omega = 6.25$ as advocated by Ravn and Uhlig (2002) for annual data. We set $\kappa_r = -2\%$ and $\kappa_d = -7\%$. These threshold choices are guided by the goals of making the recession states relatively rare, so that the economy is mostly in normal times, while ensuring that the Great Recession counts as a recession, and the Great Depression counts as a disaster.²⁹ Given these thresholds, the US economy has historically been

²⁷The average annual growth rate of US GDP per capita from 1969Q1 to 2007Q2 is 1.98 percent (NIPA, Table 7.1). We assume that both GDP per capita and asset prices are on trend in 2007Q2, which we take to be the date of the 2007 SCF survey. Recall that this survey is our baseline for measuring the Great Recession decline in household net worth.

²⁸Here we set the constant trend growth rate equal to the average annual growth rate of US GDP per capita from 1929 to 1969, which is 2.50 percent. We assume the economy is on trend in 1929.

²⁹The maximum deviation relative to trend during the Great Recession is -2.7% in 2009 and the maximum deviation during the Great Depression is -8.6% in 1933. These declines are much smaller than the declines relative to a constant growth trend reported above because the HP filter removes a lot of variance from the data. For this reason we do not use HP-filtered data to calibrate the size of aggregate shocks – doing so would greatly understate the welfare consequences of the Great Recession. At the same time, however, we have not used a linear filter over

in the recession state 13.74% of the time (29 years out of 211), and in the disaster state 2.84% of the time (6 years out of 211). These two unconditional probabilities translate to the transition probabilities reported in Table 5: $\Gamma_{n,r} = 0.165$ and $\Gamma_{r,d} = 0.207$.

This output process has the property that model Great Recessions are large, rare events. Given a 10 year period length, the expected duration of a period of normal productivity is $10/0.165 = 60.6$ years. Second, risk is highest in the recession state, when the economy either recovers or deteriorates further. In particular, there are two types of model recessions. The first, accounting for 79.3% of all recessions, lasts for 10 years and does not involve a disaster. The second type, accounting for the remaining 20.7%, lasts for 20 years in total, with 10 years of recession followed by 10 years in the disaster state. Third, our stationary process for output necessarily implies negative serial autocorrelation for 10 year output growth rates. The implied serial correlation is -0.41 , and the standard deviation of output growth (annualized and in percent units) is 0.88. The corresponding statistics from the Maddison data for the 1800 to 2010 period are -0.47 and 1.46. Thus, the negative serial in growth rates that is a feature of our output process is also apparent in historical US data. The fact that our process generates less growth rate volatility than observed empirically reflects the fact that the data feature frequent small fluctuations in addition to the large, rare recessions that are the only source of volatility, and the key focus, of the paper.

The stochastic output process we deduce from the data and which is the key driver of our asset pricing and welfare results shares important qualitative features with the processes estimated in the recent empirical and asset pricing literature on consumption disaster risk. Most closely related to ours is probably the paper by Nakamura, Steinsson, Barro, and Ursá (2013). These authors estimate a rich statistical model for consumption disasters. In their model, a persistent Markov process determines whether or not the economy is in a disaster state. As long as the economy remains in the disaster state, consumption tends to decline, but when the disaster ends consumption gradually recovers towards a latent potential value. They estimate that potential consumption typically declines during a disaster, but does so more slowly than actual consumption. Thus, a significant portion of consumption losses during recessions is subsequently reversed. Even though our aggregate shock process is less rich than the one Nakamura et al. (2013) estimate, a transition to the recession state in our model is qualitatively similar to the onset of a disaster in their model. In particular, in both models this is a time when uncertainty about the aggregate state is high. In our model this is the case because there now is a chance that the economy transits to the disaster state (or of course fully recovers) in the next period. Another important similarity is

the entire 211 year Maddison sample to define the cyclical position of the economy because doing so would conflate low frequency changes in trend growth with cyclical fluctuations.

that in both models, negative shocks are not fully permanent, in contrast to models which specify a difference-stationary processes for output.³⁰ We return to discuss the implications of modelling output as a level- versus a difference-stationary process in Section 7.1.

5.3 Intertemporal Elasticity of Substitution

The simpler version of the model explored in Section 4 indicated that the curvature parameter γ strongly influences the size of equilibrium asset price fluctuations. Given our isoelastic utility specification, γ plays two roles. First, $1/\gamma$ is the inter-temporal elasticity of substitution. In a recession, given positive expected income and consumption growth, the desire to smooth consumption inter-temporally tends to drive asset prices down, and the price decline will be larger the larger is γ . Second, γ determines households' aversion to risk. When the economy enters the recession state, risk increases, and this will drive up the equilibrium equity premium. Thus, when the economy enters the recession state, we should expect the price of safe bonds to fall by less than the price of risky stocks. We set the baseline value for γ so that a model recession replicates the decline in aggregate household net worth observed during the Great Recession. The decline in mean real household net worth relative to trend from 2007Q2, measured as the average deviation from trend over the period 2009Q1 to 2013Q4, was 26.8%. Thus, the decline in asset prices associated with the recession was $26.77/9.84 = 2.7$ times as large as the decline in output over the same period. The model replicates this asset price decline exactly at $\gamma = 4.24$.³¹

5.4 Life-Cycle Profiles

We set the life-cycle labor endowment profile $\{(1 - \theta)\varepsilon_i(z_n)\}_{i=1}^I$ equal to the empirical 2007 SCF life-cycle profile for labor income, as described in Section 2. The life-cycle profile $\{\beta_i\}_{i=2}^I$ are chosen so that the nonstochastic version of the model generates the 2007 SCF life-cycle profile for net worth, given the other determinants of life-cycle saving: the elasticity parameter γ , the profile for earnings, and the interest rate \bar{R} . In particular, note that household budget constraints in the

³⁰However, a typical Nakamura et al. (2013) disaster does have a small permanent component, while recessions in our model are long lasting, but do not change trend output in the very long run.

³¹Estimates for the intertemporal elasticity of substitution $1/\gamma$ vary significantly, from values close to zero when estimated from macro data (see, e.g., Hall 1988) to values that can be above one when estimated from micro data on specific samples of households that are stockholders (see, e.g., Vissing-Jorgensen and Attanasio 2003). A value of $1/\gamma = 1/4.24$ is consistent with most estimates from macro data, and micro data with samples representative of the US population.

deterministic version of the model can be written as

$$\begin{aligned} c_i &= (1 - \theta)\varepsilon_i + \bar{R}y_{i-1} - y_i \text{ for } i = 1, \dots, l - 1 \\ c_l &= (1 - \theta)\varepsilon_l + \bar{R}y_{l-1}, \end{aligned}$$

where y_i is total savings for age group i (net worth for age group $i + 1$). The youngest age group corresponds to households aged 20-29, and the sixth and oldest age group corresponds to households aged 70 and above. We measure $\{(1 - \theta)\varepsilon_i\}_{i=2}^l$ as 10 times average annual labor income of age group i , and $\{y_i\}_{i=1}^{l-1}$ as the average net worth of age group $i + 1$. Because agents in our model enter the economy with zero initial wealth, we recategorize asset income for the youngest group in the SCF as labor income: thus, we set $\bar{R}y_0 = 0$ and set $(1 - \theta)\varepsilon_1$ equal to 10 times average annual labor income for the youngest group plus \bar{R} times the data value for y_0 . We also set $y_l = 0$, since the oldest group does not save in our model.

Given the sequences $\{(1 - \theta)\varepsilon_i\}$, $\{y_i\}$, and \bar{R} , the budget constraints imply a life-cycle consumption profile, $\{c_i\}$. This consumption profile can be used to back out the sequence of time discount factors that rationalizes the profile as reflecting optimal saving decisions.³²

We summarize all life cycle parameters in Table 5, including the (annualized) time discount factors β_i (with β_1 normalized to 1), the life cycle profile of labor productivity ε_i , as well as the percentage declines of earnings by age in the Great Recession (see Section 5.5) and the portfolio shares for the exogenous portfolio economy (see Section 5.6). From the table we observe that β_i is generally larger than one. This reflects the fact that the data indicate strong growth in income and net worth over the life cycle between the 20-29 age group and the 50-59 age group. However, β_i should not be interpreted solely as capturing pure time preference: it also incorporates the effects of age variation in family size and composition on the marginal utility on consumption.

5.5 Cyclical Declines in Earnings

We think of the age profile for labor income calibrated to 2007 SCF data (discussed above) as corresponding to the age profile for earnings in normal times $\{\varepsilon_i(z_n)\}_{i=1}^l$. We then measure the percentage decline in labor income by age group between 2007 and 2010, in order to estimate how

³²In the nonstochastic version of the model, the household's intertemporal first-order condition implies that $\bar{R}\beta_{i+1} = (c_{i+1}/c_i)^\gamma$. Note that the consumption profile is derived directly from household budget constraints and is pinned down by the data on labor income, net worth, and returns. Thus, the consumption profile is independent of preference parameters. However, supporting this consumption profile as an equilibrium outcome requires the specific discount factor profile $\{\beta_i\}$ we employ.

recession-induced earnings losses are distributed across the age distribution. In principle, we could measure these declines directly in the SCF, but the SCF sample size is relatively small, making it difficult to precisely estimate age-group-specific earnings declines. We therefore turn to the much larger March CPS. We use the 2008 and 2011 survey years, containing data for income years 2007 and 2010. Our CPS measure of nonasset income is conceptually close to the SCF measure of labor income we used to calibrate the life-cycle profile for model earnings. This measure includes all CPS income components except for dividends, interest, rents, and one-third of self-employment income. The SCF and CPS life-cycle profiles for nonasset income align quite closely.

We construct the life-cycle profile for the recession state $\{\varepsilon_i(z_r)\}_{i=1}^I$ by multiplying the normal state profile $\{\varepsilon_i(z_n)\}_{i=1}^I$ by the age-group specific percentage declines observed in the CPS, and then renormalizing so that average efficiency in the recession state is equal to one. The declines in earnings by age group fed into the model $(z_r\varepsilon_i(z_r) - \varepsilon_i(z_n)) / \varepsilon_i(z_n)$ are shown in Table 5.³³ As expected, the age-earnings profile shifts in favor of older generations in a recession, indicating larger earnings losses and larger potential welfare costs for the young.

Note that with a period length of 10 years, earnings losses are mechanically quite persistent in our model, consistent with the empirical literature that studies labor market outcomes of young cohorts in deep recessions (e.g. Kahn 2010, Oreopoulos et al. 2012, and Schwandt and von Wachter 2017). Kahn (2010) documents losses in earnings following the recession of the early 1980s lasting up to 15 years. Schwandt and von Wachter (2017) find effects that persist until 10 years into the labor market. For a moderate recession that raises unemployment 3 percentage points, they report a loss of cumulated earnings for labor market entrants of 60% of annual earnings. The loss we impose in our calibration (for the Great Recession in which the unemployment rate rose 6 percentage points) is 143% of annual earnings (see Table 5), a number that accords well with their estimates.

5.6 Calibration with Exogenous Portfolios

In our baseline model, agents choose both how much to save and how to divide savings between stocks and bonds. We also consider an alternative version of the model in which savings is a choice, but in which the portfolio split is exogenous. In this version, we introduce as new parameters age-varying portfolio splits $\{\lambda_i\}_{i=1}^I$, which we set equal to the age-group-specific shares of risky assets in net worth in the SCF (see Table 2, reproduced in Table 5). All other parameter values are

³³The differentials across age groups are similar when considering a much narrower measure of labor income that only includes wage and salary income.

identical to the baseline model.

Note that the nonstochastic versions of the models with exogenous and endogenous portfolios are identical. In particular, absent aggregate shocks, agents in the model are indifferent about which portfolio mix to hold, and thus any allocation of stocks and bonds across age groups – including the one observed in the data – is an equilibrium. Once aggregate shocks are introduced, the two economies are of course no longer identical.

The advantage of the exogenous portfolios model, relative to the baseline, is that by forcing model agents to hold exactly the portfolios that actual households were holding in 2007, we generate a very realistic distribution of capital losses across age groups in a simulated model recession. The disadvantage of the exogenous portfolios approach is that it limits the ways in which agents can hedge aggregate risk ex ante, and the ways they can respond to shocks ex post.³⁴

6 Results for the Benchmark Economy

The calibration procedure just described delivers realistic life-cycle profiles for earnings and net worth. The calibration also ensures that when the shock resembling the Great Recession hits, it generates realistic declines in labor earnings and in aggregate asset values. These are necessary ingredients for our model to serve as a laboratory for studying the distributional effects of large recessions. Before exploring how the welfare costs of a recession vary by age, we first consider the model's implications for equilibrium asset price dynamics and for equilibrium portfolios.

6.1 Asset Pricing Predictions for the Great Recession

Figure 2 plots asset prices along a model simulation in which the sequence for aggregate productivity features a long period of normal times, a Great-Recession-like event in period zero, and a return to normal times in subsequent periods. From the perspective of private household expectations, such a return to normal times was likely, but not certain. The top panel of the figure indicates that the price of stocks falls by 29.2 percent when the recession strikes, while the price of bonds barely moves.³⁵

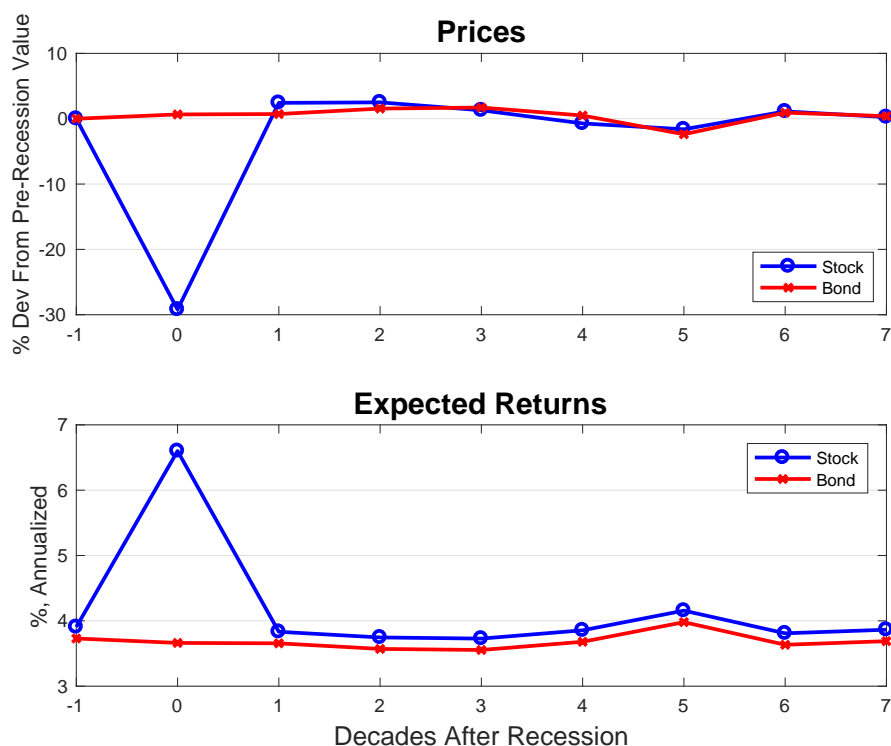
The fact that equilibrium bond prices remain largely constant reflects two offsetting economic

³⁴In the exogenous portfolios model, one can generate equity premia of arbitrary size by appropriate choice of portfolio shares $\{\lambda_i\}$ and/or outstanding bonds B .

³⁵Note again, as already discussed in the simple three-period model, that a low IES ($\gamma > 1$) is crucial for the finding that risky asset prices move more than output. With a unitary elasticity (log-utility) Proposition 3 in the appendix shows that the elasticity of asset prices to output is exactly equal to one.

forces. On the one hand, expected consumption growth is positive in the recession state, since with a 79.3 percent probability, output will recover in the next period. Positive expected consumption growth constitutes an incentive for households to borrow, which pushes up the risk free rate. On the other hand, conditional on being in the recession state, there is a 20.7 percent chance that the economy will fall into the disaster state. The fact that disaster risk is so salient in the recession state means that the precautionary motive to accumulate safe assets is strong, putting upward pressure on the price of safe assets and thus downward pressure on the risk free rate.

Figure 2: EQUILIBRIUM ASSET PRICES



The bottom panel of Figure 2 shows expected returns to stocks and bonds, on an annualized basis. The expected return to stocks always exceeds the expected return to bonds, indicating a positive equity premium.³⁶ The equity premium jumps notably when the recession hits, because in the recession state there is a large positive covariance between future stock returns and future consumption. In particular, households worry about very low stock returns in the positive probability event that the economy transits to the consumption disaster state.³⁷ Thus they require a large

³⁶We discuss standard asset pricing implications of the model in Section 6.6.

³⁷When the recession simulated in Figure 2 is followed immediately by the disaster state, the stock price in the disaster state is 74.7 percent below its pre-recession value.

risk premium to hold stocks in the Great Recession state.

To summarize, the decline in asset values in the model recession is driven by a sharp rise in the equilibrium risk premium depressing risky asset prices, and is not due to a rise in the equilibrium risk free rate. Is this model-based narrative for asset price dynamics consistent with the pattern observed empirically during the Great Recession? As documented in Section 2, the prices of risky assets – especially stocks and housing – fell sharply from mid 2007 to mid 2009. In contrast, and consistent with the model, the price of safe assets changed very little. For example, the yield on 10 year Treasury Inflation-Indexed bonds – perhaps the closest empirical proxy to the bond in our model – changed little between mid 2007 and mid 2009.³⁸

In the recovery following the model recession, stock prices recover and overshoot their pre-recession level. This reflects the endogenous dynamics of the wealth distribution. When the shock hits, older households, especially those in the 60–69 age group, sell additional assets to fund consumption. Thus, after the recession, a larger share of aggregate wealth is held by younger cohorts, who are net buyers of assets, while less is held by older sellers. This translates into higher net asset demand after the recession and, consequently, overshooting stock prices. As younger cohorts age, the wealth distribution gradually shifts back towards older cohorts, who are net asset sellers. Thus stock prices fall over time.

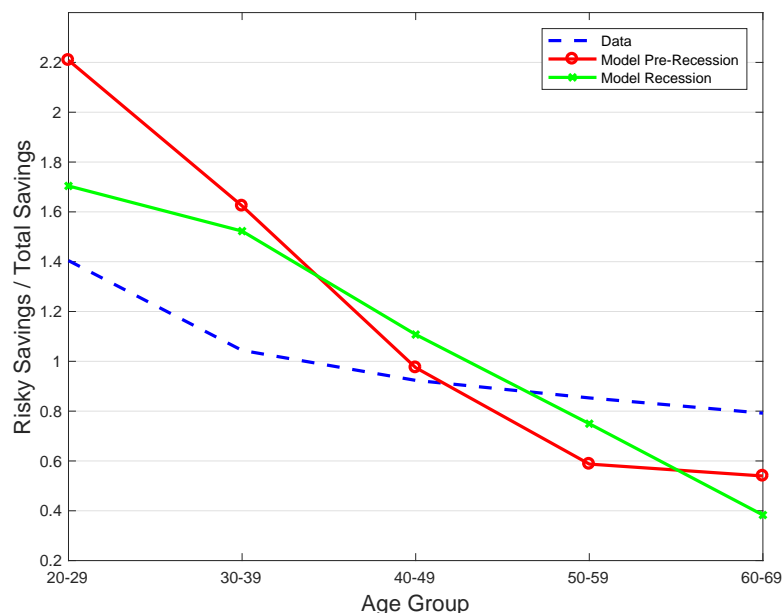
6.2 Portfolio Implications

In the benchmark economy, households choose their asset portfolios optimally to hedge against earnings and asset return risk. Of course, since the underlying risk is aggregate in nature, endogenous portfolio choices can only achieve reallocation of this risk across different generations. Figure 3 plots the fraction of total savings in stocks by age in the model, both in normal times and in the recession period, as well as the fraction of total savings in risky assets by age in the 2007 Survey of Consumer Finances. Consistent with the data, younger households in the model find it optimal to hold riskier asset portfolios than older households, resulting in a downward-sloping life-cycle profile for the risky portfolio share. For example, in normal times the youngest model age group has 220 percent of its savings in stocks, indicating a negative bond position equal to 120 percent of net worth, while the oldest model age group has a portfolio comprising 54 percent stocks and 46 percent bonds. The share of risky assets in total savings also declines with age in the SCF,

³⁸TIPS yields did fall more notably between mid 2009 and 2012, but this decline appears more secular than cyclical in nature. Absent the Great Depression state (and thus absent time-varying aggregate risk) risk-free returns in the model would counterfactually shoot up in the Great Recession state.

indicating that the model offers a theoretical rationale for the observed tendency of households to shift towards safer portfolios as they age. However, the figure also shows that the age variation predicted by theory is more extreme than that observed in the data, with the young taking more leveraged positions, and the old holding correspondingly more bonds than is observed empirically.

Figure 3: PORTFOLIO SHARES IN RISKY ASSETS: MODELS AND DATA



Why do model households gradually adopt safer portfolios as they age? First, note that markets are sequentially complete given that there are two freely traded assets and two possible next period aggregate shock realizations z' conditional on each value for current output z .³⁹ Thus, all households *born prior to the recession* share consumption risk perfectly in the recession period.⁴⁰ Recall that when the recession hits, stock prices fall by much more than output. Thus, younger households, who have little wealth relative to earnings, require a more leveraged portfolio to face the same consumption exposure to aggregate risk as older, wealthier households.⁴¹

As the economy falls into a recession, Figure 3 indicates that the age-risk profile flattens significantly, with the youngest households choosing to reduce leverage. The logic is that in the

³⁹We exploit this fact in the computation of this version of the model; see Appendix B.

⁴⁰This is shown in Figure 4, discussed below. Note that the OLG structure of the model prevents cohorts alive at a particular point in time from sharing aggregate risk with *past* or *future* generations.

⁴¹Note that with logarithmic preferences and symmetric earnings losses, prices fall exactly as much as output, human and financial wealth are therefore equally exposed to aggregate risk, and asset portfolios are age invariant (see Proposition 3 in the appendix).

model Great Recession, a Great Depression becomes possible, with an associated collapse in risky asset prices. This reduces the appetite of the young for risky assets. However, this group still holds the riskiest portfolios, and, as we will demonstrate in Sections 6.3 and 6.5, benefits from buying risky assets at temporarily depressed prices.

Overall, the age variation in portfolios in the model is somewhat larger than the age variation in the SCF. The reason is that stock prices fall very sharply in the recession state – by three times as much as output. Older households, who rely primarily on asset sales to finance consumption, would suffer disproportionate consumption losses if they did not hold a significant share of bonds in their portfolios. The flip side of the old holding a large position of bonds in equilibrium is that the young must take a significantly short bond position to clear the bond market.

It is possible that the discrepancy between the portfolio age-profile predicted by theory and the one observed in practice reflects economic forces absent in our model. Alternatively, it could be that leverage constraints prevent young households from debt-financing risky asset purchases on the scale that the theory predicts they would like to. The latter consideration is especially relevant for real estate, which is an important component of the stock of risky assets in the SCF data. In Section 6.4 we will therefore study a version of the model with exogenous portfolios in which we force households to hold precisely the portfolios observed in the 2007 SCF. This will allow us to explore the importance of portfolio allocations prior to the Great Recession for the distribution of welfare losses by age from this large macroeconomic shock. We now document the magnitude of these losses for the benchmark economy.

6.3 Welfare Losses from the Great Recession

Table 6 reports the welfare consequences of a model Great Recession event. These numbers are computed assuming that the recession is preceded by a long period of normal times, with subsequent output realizations drawn from the distribution described in Section 5. Welfare is measured as the percentage change in consumption (in all states and over all remaining periods of life) under a no recession scenario needed to make households indifferent between the current aggregate state being z_n rather than z_r .

Each age group suffers welfare losses, but these losses are monotonically increasing in age and differ dramatically in magnitude. Whereas the oldest cohort loses 10.0 percent of remaining lifetime consumption, the youngest cohort – the 20 year olds who become economically active in the recession period – experience only moderate welfare losses of 1.1 percent of lifetime consumption,

Table 6: WELFARE LOSSES BY AGE (% LIFETIME CONS.)

Age	Welfare
20-29	-1.07
30-39	-4.78
40-49	-5.69
50-59	-7.48
60-69	-9.61
70+	-10.00

even though this group's labor earnings decline the most in the recession period.

Figure 4 plots the consumption dynamics that underlie these welfare numbers. The figure plots changes in consumption, relative to the pre-recession state, for each of the six model age groups, at each date along the simulation corresponding to Figure 2. The first set of bars shows the immediate age-specific consumption responses to the recession. In this period, consumption of all age groups except the youngest falls by 10.0 percent, while the cohort that becomes active in the recession period sees a smaller consumption drop of only 7.0 percent.

Figure 4: CONSUMPTION DYNAMICS BY AGE



For the oldest generation, the current recession period is the last period of life, and thus welfare losses and current consumption losses coincide. The 10.0 percent loss for this group reflects the combined effects of lost labor earnings due to the recession (their earnings fall 1.4 percent, according

to the data) and the valuation loss they suffer on the stock component of their portfolio: stocks are 54 percent of this group's savings, and stock prices fall by nearly 30 percent. Households in the middle age groups see larger labor earnings losses, but are less reliant on immediate asset sales to finance consumption. Given the portfolios they have chosen, all cohorts 30 and older end up suffering the same immediate 10.0 percent consumption decline in the recession period, and these same cohorts experience equal (though smaller) consumption losses in each subsequent period. Recall again that markets are sequentially complete and thus all age groups that were economically active in the pre-recession period share aggregate consumption risk equally.⁴²

In contrast, the fact that the youngest group sees consumption fall by less than output indicates that this group absorbs less than an equal share of aggregate risk. In every subsequent period, the cohort that entered in the recession period enjoys consumption that is between 2 and 3 percent higher than consumption of the same age group would have been in the absence of the Great Recession. The reason the youngest age group fares so well, notwithstanding a very large hit to labor earnings when the recession hits, is that they get to buy assets and thus shares of future dividends at temporarily and greatly depressed prices.⁴³ In Section 6.5 below we will further investigate the importance of the asset price channel by considering a “partial equilibrium” version of our model in which recessions do not necessarily entail asset price declines.

6.4 Exogenous Portfolios

We now turn to the alternative model specification described in Section 5.6 in which we impose the risky versus safe asset portfolio shares observed in the 2007 SCF, rather than allowing households to choose their portfolios. The key advantage of this alternative model, relative to our baseline, is that it will more accurately replicate the empirical distribution of capital losses from price declines of risky assets when we simulate the Great Recession. The key disadvantage is that the path for

⁴²That is, the cohorts 40 and older experience the same consumption loss in period 1, while those 50 and older experience the same consumption loss in period 2, and so on.

⁴³To what extent do the differential welfare losses documented so far reflect the fact that the current old will spend the remainder of their lives in the recession state, while younger households, in expectation, will spend the majority of their future lives in normal times. In order to address this issue, in Table A-6 in Appendix H, we report an alternative, wealth-based welfare loss measure. More precisely, we ask how much we must reduce *wealth* for each cohort in the no-recession state for households to be indifferent between life with or without a recession in the current period. We normalize these wealth changes by per capita consumption in normal times. Table A-6 indicates that a similar pattern of welfare losses emerges as from our consumption-based measure: welfare losses are broadly monotonic in age in that older generations are made massively worse off by the recession, whereas the welfare losses for the youngest generations are relatively modest. Note that the wealth-based measure shows especially large losses for the 60-69 age cohort. It is at that age that life-cycle consumption peaks, and thus a given percentage lifetime consumption loss translates into a large absolute wealth transfer required to compensate that group for a Great-Recession-like event.

the equilibrium equity premium will now be a mechanical artefact of the exogenous portfolio splits that agents are forced to adopt, and will not capture time-varying appetite for risk.

Table 7 compares asset price declines when a Great Recession hits in the baseline endogenous portfolio, and the alternative exogenous portfolio economy. There are two notable differences between the two models. First, the aggregate decline in asset prices is significantly smaller in the exogenous portfolio model. Second, bond prices fall sharply in that model – implying a counter-factual jump in the risk free rate – while bond prices barely move in the baseline model.

Table 7: ELASTICITY ξ OF ASSET PRICES TO OUTPUT

Asset	Baseline Model	Exogenous Portfolios
Wealth	2.72	2.02
Stock	2.97	2.08
Bond	-0.07	1.31

To understand why asset prices are less sensitive to aggregate shocks with exogenous portfolios, recall that in this economy with fixed portfolios the young are assigned safer portfolios (i.e., they have less riskless debt and less risky assets) and the old riskier portfolios with fewer safe bonds, relative to the baseline endogenous portfolios model (see Figure 3). This means that when the recession hits and risky asset prices fall, capital losses are smaller for younger cohorts relative to the baseline model, whereas capital losses for older cohorts are relatively larger. Thus, the wealth distribution in the recession period is tilted more strongly toward the young in the exogenous portfolio model, relative to the benchmark. This difference in the change of the wealth distribution translates into greater support for asset prices in the recession period in the exogenous portfolio model, because younger cohorts are in the net saving part of their life cycle, whereas older cohorts are dis-saving for life-cycle reasons.

The reason why *both* stock and bond prices fall in the recession period in the exogenous portfolios economy is that households are forced to buy stocks and bonds in fixed age-specific proportions, so the extra risk they face in the recession state by construction cannot translate into an increase in the relative demand for safe as opposed to risky assets.⁴⁴

⁴⁴Why, then, do bond prices fall less than stock prices, even with exogenous portfolios? The reason is that the young hold riskier portfolios than the old, and thus a model recession does shift the wealth distribution towards the old (albeit less dramatically so than in the baseline model), and the old devote a larger share of their savings to bonds. If we imposed (counter-factually) age-invariant portfolio shares for the risky asset, stock and bond prices would fall by an identical amount.

Table 8: WELFARE LOSSES, ENDOGENOUS & EXOGENOUS PORTFOLIOS (% LIFET. CONS.)

Age	Endogenous	Exogenous
20-29	-1.07	-2.39
30-39	-4.78	-2.91
40-49	-5.69	-2.54
50-59	-7.48	-7.30
60-69	-9.61	-13.73
70+	-10.00	-11.37

Table 8 compares the age distribution of welfare losses in the exogenous portfolios economy to those in our baseline endogenous portfolio model. The broad pattern of welfare losses is similar, with the young still suffering less than the old. Two differences are noteworthy. First, the welfare losses for the cohort that enters the economy in the recession period are larger in the exogenous portfolios model, by 1.3 percentage points. Second, the 60 year olds suffer also lose more with exogenous portfolios, with losses now 13.7 percent of consumption. In both cases, the true welfare losses are likely intermediate between the two models. In particular, for the youngest group, the endogenous portfolio model potentially underestimates true welfare losses, since in this model the youngest group exploit temporarily depressed stock prices by choosing highly levered portfolios, where the degree of leverage exceeds that observed in the SCF prior to the Great Recession. On the other hand, the exogenous portfolio model, likely exaggerates welfare losses for the youngest group, since in that model safe interest rates counter-factually rise in the recession state, and the young are forced to borrow. For the 60 year-olds, the endogenous portfolio model potentially underestimates welfare losses because this group's portfolio is too safe relative to the SCF (see Figure 3). At the same time, the exogenous portfolio model may exaggerate welfare losses because the 60 year-olds are not allowed to switch to a safer portfolios when the recession hits, and are therefore excessively exposed to the risk of stock price declines should a disaster strike.⁴⁵

Finally, one interesting implication of our results is that although the endogenous portfolio model permits perfect sharing of aggregate risk between generations who enter the economy *prior* to the recession, it delivers worse risk sharing than the exogenous portfolios model between existing and *newborn* cohorts, because equilibrium asset prices fall sharply in the recession period.

⁴⁵In the endogenous portfolio model, the 60 year-olds reallocate their portfolio towards safe assets in the recession state, because this group will rely almost entirely on asset sales to finance consumption in the next period, when the disaster might strike, bringing a collapse in stock prices.

6.5 Quantifying the Asset Price Channel

How important are general equilibrium asset price movements in generating the age distribution for welfare losses from a model Great Recession reported in Table 8? We have highlighted the ability of the young to buy assets at depressed prices in the recession as the main reason for their rather small welfare losses, but is this intuition correct? To address these questions we now revisit our cost-of-a-Great Recession calculation under two alternative partial equilibrium scenarios in which we feed in exogenous paths for asset prices.⁴⁶ The two scenarios differ with respect to what happens to asset prices at date 0.

In our first “no price recession” scenario, there is no asset price recession: aggregate start of period wealth W in the recession period is assumed equal to its value in the pre-recession period, and the age distribution of this wealth A is also equal to the pre-recession distribution. In our second “no price recovery” scenario the Great Recession shock reduces aggregate start of period wealth W by exactly the same amount as in the baseline general equilibrium model, and the recession also changes the age distribution of wealth shares A as in the baseline model. In both scenarios, from date 0 onward the gross return to saving agents face is constant and equal to the return R to the aggregate market portfolio in the pre-recession period. Note that this assumption implies no asset price recovery in the second scenario.

We assume that for all $t \geq 0$ agents can trade one period Arrow securities that allow them to perfectly insure against aggregate risk. Given these assumptions, the household problem at age i and date 0 is to maximize expected remaining lifetime utility subject to a lifetime budget constraint. This budget constraint imposes that the discounted present value of date- and state-contingent consumption cannot exceed initial financial wealth $A^i W$ (which is scenario-specific) plus the discounted present value of labor income (which is common across both scenarios), where this present value depends on the initial aggregate state z_0 and discounts future earnings at rate R .

Under both scenarios the optimal household allocation then amounts to setting consumption at each date and state to a fixed age-dependent fraction of date 0 lifetime income. Moreover, the welfare cost of a recession – defined exactly as in Section 6.3 – is simply the age-specific percentage decline in the present value of lifetime resources (labor income plus initial wealth) that the recession entails, see Appendix I. Table 9 below reports the welfare costs of a recession in the baseline general equilibrium model from Section 6.3 (with endogenous portfolio choice), and from

⁴⁶As in Section 6.3, we imagine a scenario in which a long period of normal times is followed by a Great-Recession like shock at date 0. Also as in our previous experiment, this shock reduces current labor earnings and in addition shifts the probability distribution over future earnings.

the two partial equilibrium alternatives just described.

Table 9: WELFARE LOSSES, EXOGENOUS ASSET PRICES (% LIFETIME CONS.)

Age	Benchmark	No Price Decline	No Price Recovery
20-29	-1.07	-6.53	-6.53
30-39	-4.78	-7.19	-14.03
40-49	-5.69	-6.90	-17.40
50-59	-7.48	-6.55	-16.33
60-69	-9.61	-3.38	-11.27
70+	-10.00	-1.88	-10.00

From the table it is immediately obvious that the age distribution of welfare losses depends crucially on the asset pricing model. To understand these differences, it is useful to conceptualize the welfare consequences of the Great Recession for each age cohort as depending on (i) how the recession impacts the discounted present value of their labor earnings, (ii) how it shapes the initial value of their financial portfolio, and (iii) how much they have to gain from a possible future asset price recovery. In the baseline model (column 1) all three forces are active, while the “no price recession” case isolates the first force, and the “no price recovery” experiment illustrates the combined impact of the first two effects.

The “No Price Decline” column of the table indicates that if we abstract from asset price movements, the age distribution of welfare costs would be largely reversed relative to the baseline case in column 1. In particular, younger age groups now experience large welfare losses, while the oldest two groups lose much less. Note that this result arises even though the younger age groups do not expect to live their whole lives in the recession state, while the 70+ group do, and the 60 year-olds have the not very pleasant prospect of a decade of recession followed by the risk of a disaster in their last decade of life. The reason for these changes in the distribution of the welfare losses when we shut down asset price movements is two-fold. First, the young face larger percentage declines in labor earnings in the recession state. Second, the old rely much more on savings to finance consumption than labor earnings, and in the “No Price Decline” scenario the recession does not dent the value of their savings. We conclude that abstracting entirely from asset price movements would give an extremely misleading picture of the age distribution of welfare losses from the Great Recession.

Moving to the “No Price Recovery” column now adds the welfare costs of capital losses from declining asset prices, assumed to be permanent in this scenario. This drastically increases the average welfare cost of the recession in the economy, and also changes the age distribution of

these costs. The cost for the youngest group is unaffected (relative to column 3) because this group starts its economic life with no assets, whereas the cost for the oldest group is as in the baseline general equilibrium model (column 2) because whether or not asset prices recover in the future is irrelevant for this group. The welfare costs are largest for 40 and 50 year olds, who suffer both significant declines in labor earnings, and large capital losses on their portfolios.

Comparing the “No Price Recovery” case to the baseline model indicates that the expected asset price recovery that arises in general equilibrium sharply reduces the welfare costs of the recession for younger age groups. In fact, because younger age groups are life-cycle savers, they actually suffer smaller welfare losses in the baseline model – in which prices fall and then recover – than in the “No Price Decline” model in which prices never move. This effect is most extreme for the new born, who suffer no capital losses, but benefit greatly from expected asset price appreciation.

Overall, the partial equilibrium thought experiments in this section make very clear that in order to assess the level and age distribution of welfare costs from the Great Recession, it is crucial to incorporate into the analysis the impact of asset price movements. Moreover, it is critical to make forecasts about future asset prices, in addition to specifying how asset prices move in the recession itself. The key advantage of our general equilibrium structural approach is that the theory itself generates joint predictions for the probability distribution over future labor income and future asset prices, which imposes discipline over asset price dynamics, and their covariance with earnings and consumption.

6.6 Standard Asset Pricing Implications

Section 6.1 documented that the model captures well the two asset price facts that are central for quantifying the welfare consequences of the Great Recession by age: the large observed decline in risky asset prices and the relative constancy of the risk-free interest rate. We again want to stress that it is not our intent to build a model that offers a realistic account of movements in financial asset returns over typical business cycles. With that caveat in place, we now offer a broader discussion of our model’s asset pricing properties.

Table 10 summarizes the mean and volatility of risky asset and risk-free bond returns, as well as their correlation. We also report their empirical counterparts, derived from the updated Shiller (1992) annual data on stock and bond returns. For both the model and the data we calculate 10 year returns and report (annualized) means and standard deviations of log gross returns.⁴⁷ In

⁴⁷Because the model is solved at a 10 year frequency, return statistics are calculated directly based on a long

order to understand the importance of the possibility of Great-Depression-like disasters for asset pricing moments we also report model-based statistics that ignore these low probability events. In addition to providing further insight into how our model works, one could also interpret these statistics as emerging from a version of our model in which the disaster state exists in the minds of model agents but never materializes in reality, or as offering a theoretical counterpart to empirical moments drawn from samples in which no disasters occur (such as the postwar U.S.)

Table 10: STATISTICS FOR 10-YEAR RETURNS

Benchmark Model			
Asset	Average	Std. Dev.	Correlation
Stock	4.50%	31.2%	
Bond	4.09%	25.3%	0.79
Model w/o Disasters			
Asset	Average	Std. Dev.	Correlation
Stock	4.41%	16.6%	
Bond	3.68%	1.2%	-0.07
Data			
Asset	Average	Std. Dev.	Correlation
Stock	6.62%	36.4%	
Bond	2.29%	30.4%	0.01

Comparing the top and bottom panels of the table, we observe that the volatility of ten year model stock and bond returns lines up well with the data, including the extent to which stock returns are more volatile than bond returns. Comparing the top and middle panels of the table indicates that the small possibility of slipping into a Great Depression, conditional on experiencing a Great Recession, is crucial for these results. Abstracting from the Great Depression both stock and especially bond return volatility would be counterfactually low. The table also suggests that stock and bond returns co-move too strongly in the model, relative to the data (top versus bottom panel), but this co-movement is driven exclusively by rare model disasters in which both stock and bond prices collapse and the real interest rate jumps.⁴⁸ In the one disaster in the data – the Great Depression – real interest rates were in fact high (see Table 2, column 11 in Hamilton, 1987).

Average returns to risky assets in the model exceed average returns to bonds, but if we interpret simulation of model stock and bond returns. We simulate the model for a large number of periods because Great-Depression-like disasters are rare but important for return volatility.

To calculate the empirical counterparts to model return moments we use the series on Shiller’s website, which span the period from 1871 to 2014. We derive 10 year gross returns as the product of 10 year contiguous annual gross returns based on the data from 1874-2014. Details of our calculations are contained in Appendix G.

⁴⁸The empirical correlation is sensitive to the sample: see Appendix G.

the risky asset in the model narrowly as corresponding to traded equity then the model does not generate a large enough equity premium. The model premium is roughly 40 basis points per annum, compared to more than 400 basis points in the data.

Notwithstanding that our main objective is to study a specific historical episode, this relatively small equity premium seems to offer a case for adopting a more flexible preference specification, as in Epstein and Zin (1989) and Epstein and Zin (1991), that allows for high risk aversion without imposing a low intertemporal elasticity substitution. We now use a representative agent (RA) version of our model to justify our choice of time-separable preferences (solving the full overlapping-generations economy accurately for very high risk aversion is computationally challenging). Table 11 displays selected asset pricing statistics for this version of the model, for varying degrees of risk aversion and the intertemporal elasticity of substitution.

Table 11: EPSTEIN-ZIN PREFERENCES IN THE REPRESENTATIVE AGENT MODEL

	Risk. Aver.	IES	$r(z_n, A_n)$	$r(z_r, A_r)$	Equity Premium	Wealth Decline
OLG (1)	4.24	1/4.24	3.73	3.66	0.40	-26.8
RA (2)	4.24	1/4.24	3.57	3.69	0.56	-29.2
RA (3)	4.76	1/3.77	3.65	3.65	0.52	-26.8
RA (4)	100.00	1/4.75	0.16	-6.12	3.61	-26.8

Row (1) is the baseline overlapping-generations model. Rows (2), (3), and (4) are representative agent economies with different values for risk aversion and for the IES. All other parameters are identical to the baseline model, with $\beta = \frac{1}{1.5485}$. Risk free rates are $r(z, A) = 100 \times \left(\frac{1}{q(z, A)} - 1 \right)$. The equity premium is the unconditional average annualized excess return to stocks, in percent. Recession wealth declines are $100 \times \left(\frac{p(z_r, A') + q(z_r, A')B}{p(z_n, A) + q(z_n, A)B} - 1 \right)$. In the representative agent model, the wealth distribution A is not a state variable. In the overlapping-generations economy, risk-free rates and wealth declines are computed assuming that A_n , the pre-recession wealth distribution, is the equilibrium distribution following a long period of normal times. The recession distribution, A_r , is given by the equilibrium law of motion $A_r = G(z_n, A_n, z_r)$.

The first two rows of the table indicate that with our baseline parameterization the RA and the OLG versions of the model have broadly similar implications for average returns to safe and risky assets, indicating that we can safely use the representative agent version as a laboratory for exploring alternative specifications. The third row of Table 11 indicates that if we were to target both the exact fall in risky asset prices and a constant real risk-free interest rate, the required risk aversion and inverse of the IES, while not exactly equal to each other, would numerically be close. Since plausible asset price dynamics during a model Great Recession are important for our welfare analysis, we are therefore naturally drawn toward something close to time-separable utility.

To reinforce this point, suppose we were to follow many asset pricing papers and set the risk

aversion coefficient to generate an equity premium on the order of 4% (as documented empirically in Table 10) while still choosing the IES to match the fall in risky asset prices observed in the Great Recession. In the representative agent version of our model this requires a risk aversion in excess of 100 and an IES of 1/4.75. However, as the last row of Table 11 documents, a model Great Recession is now associated with a massively counterfactual fall in the risk-free rate. In our OLG model such an interest rate decline would allow the youngest generation to borrow at a negative risk-free rate to finance risky asset purchases. However, we do not want to pursue a welfare analysis that rests on a counter-factual collapse in the risk-free rate.

6.7 Movements in the Wealth Distribution in the Great Recession

The asset price movements and endogenous portfolio adjustments implied by the model induce shifts in the wealth distribution over the cycle, and thus in the model Great Recession (and subsequent recovery). In this section we discuss how the implications of the model along this dimension line up with data from the SCF. Recognizing that the SCF is available for 2007, 2010 and 2013, our preferred interpretation of the empirical time series is that 2007 captures the period before the Great Recession (with peak asset prices), that 2010 is a period in the midst of the recession (when asset prices have fallen but not recovered), and that 2013 reflects a time when the economy has at least partially recovered.

Table 12 reports the dynamics of net worth shares in both model and in the SCF. For both the baseline and exogenous portfolio model specifications, we report net worth shares in three consecutive model periods: (i) the pre-recession state (where the economy has been in the normal state for many periods), (ii) the period in which the large recession strikes, and (iii) the post-recession period, assuming a recovery in output. Model net worth for age group i in year t is measured as the period t pre-dividend value of stocks purchased at $t - 1$ plus the income accruing to bonds purchased at $t - 1$:

$$net_worth_{it} = \frac{\lambda_{i-1,t-1} y_{i-1,t-1}}{p_{t-1}} (p_t + d_t) + \frac{(1 - \lambda_{i-1,t-1}) y_{i-1,t-1}}{q_{t-1}}$$

Given this definition, net worth shares by age correspond exactly to the model state vector A :

$$net_worth_share_{it} = \frac{net_worth_{it}}{\sum_{j=1}^I net_worth_{jt}} = A_{it}.$$

We measure net worth shares by age in the SCF analogously. In particular, we divide each age group's average net worth by the unweighted sum of average net worth across groups.

Table 12: DYNAMICS OF NET WORTH DISTRIBUTION: MODELS AND DATA

Age	Endogenous Portfolios			Exogenous Portfolios			Data: Net Worth SCF		
	Pre-Rec.	Rec.	Recov.	Pre-Rec.	Rec.	Recov.	2007	2010	2013
20-29	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	2.30	1.27	1.50
30-39	6.29	4.20	7.74	6.25	5.67	5.75	5.95	4.20	6.05
40-49	14.73	11.98	14.61	14.42	14.06	13.35	13.94	13.97	14.25
50-59	25.59	25.20	25.23	25.31	25.28	24.90	24.70	24.52	22.92
60-69	31.76	34.71	31.21	32.03	32.44	31.84	31.45	32.66	30.53
70+	21.62	23.91	21.21	21.99	22.55	24.16	21.67	23.38	24.74
total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

In the model, when the economy transits from normal times to the Great-Recession state, the wealth shares of the 30 and 40 year-old age groups decline on impact, whereas those of the older age groups increase.⁴⁹ This shift in the wealth distribution towards older cohorts is driven purely by the fact that the young choose riskier portfolios in normal times (or are forced to hold riskier portfolios in the exogenous portfolios version of the model). When asset prices subsequently recover, the same life-cycle portfolio risk profile disproportionately benefits the young, and their wealth shares recover as the economy returns to the normal state.

In addition to these mechanical movements due to endogenous asset price fluctuations and age heterogeneity in portfolios, the baseline model with endogenous portfolios also predicts that the cohort that becomes economically active in a recession (who are in their 20's in the recession period, and in their 30's in the recovery period) benefits from being able to purchase assets at depressed prices, and is therefore unusually asset-rich in the recovery period. The changes in net worth shares are larger in the endogenous portfolio specification, where the young choose more levered portfolios in the recession period, and therefore gain more from the asset price recovery.

The net worth share dynamics observed in the data are similar to those predicted by the theory, and generally lie in between the two alternative model specifications. The share of aggregate net worth held by 30 year-olds declined from 5.95% in 2007 to 4.20% in 2010, whereas the share of the 70+ group increased from 21.67% to 23.38%. Subsequently, the net worth share of 30 year-olds rebounded to 6.05% in the 2013 SCF. This rebound is consistent with their having benefited from

⁴⁹Recall that the youngest age group is born with zero assets and thus its wealth share is unaffected.

saving at depressed prices, though more time and data is required to assess whether the recent asset price recovery will permanently boost their wealth share.

7 Robustness of Our Results

The purpose of this section is to investigate the robustness of our results to alternative parameterizations and modeling assumptions. First, in Subsection 7.1, we analyze the importance of the nature of the stochastic productivity process for the potency of the asset price channel. In Subsection 7.2 we assess the importance of the heterogeneous labor market experience across age cohorts in the Great Recession for the welfare results. Finally, Subsection 7.3 evaluates the relative significance of the asset pricing and labor market effects when households differ in their wealth positions *within* age cohorts.

7.1 Level- or Growth-Rate Shocks?

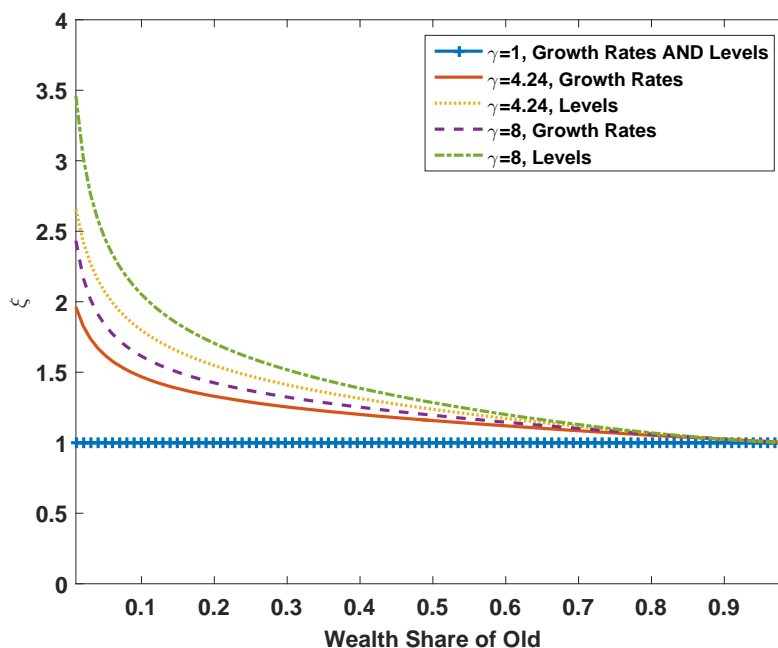
In our model, aggregate output z is mean reverting, which implies that in a model recession output and asset prices are expected to recover (although they might fall further if the economy enters the disaster state). Under what conditions are our results robust to introducing permanent shocks to z ? To provide a transparent answer to this question, we turn back to the three-period version of our model from Section 4, but now assume that the *growth rate* of output $g' = z'/z$ follows a finite state Markov process with state space \mathcal{G} and transition matrix $\Gamma_{g,g'}$. In Appendix F.2 we show that the optimality and market clearing conditions used to compute the equilibrium asset price function and law of motion are virtually identical to those in our benchmark model, but expressed in terms of the price-output ratio $\tilde{p}(g, A) = \frac{p(z, A)}{z}$ where the exogenous growth rate g between last period and today takes the place of the exogenous state variable z .

In this section we make three points. First, we show that the asset price decline (relative to output) in the model with stochastic growth rates is comparable to the decline in the model with trend-stationary output if and only if output growth over longer time periods (ten or twenty years) is negatively serially correlated, as it is in U.S. data. Second, we will show that the absolute welfare losses from a model recession are significantly larger in the stochastic growth economy for all but the oldest generation. Third, the *relative* welfare losses by age are quite similar across the growth-rate stationary and trend stationary specifications.

We retain the same calibration as in Section 4, but now assume that output growth can take two equally likely values $g \in \{g_n, g_r\}$ that satisfy $g_n g_r = 1$ and $g_r/g_n = z_r/z_n$. Thus, the output

decline when the economy falls into a Great Recession is as large as in the trend-stationary model and equal to $z_r/z_n - 1 = 9.84\%$. The serial correlation of growth rates is determined by the persistence of both states, $\Gamma_{rr} = \Gamma_{nn}$. Real output per capita growth rates over 10 or 20 year intervals are negatively correlated in U.S. data. Using data from 1900 on yields a serial correlation of twenty year growth rates of -0.55, which the model replicates given $\Gamma_{rr} = \Gamma_{nn} = 0.225$.

Figure 5: RELATIVE ASSET PRICE DECLINE: LEVEL VS. GROWTH RATE SHOCKS



In Figure 5 we display the relative asset price decline ξ as a function of the wealth distribution, both for the trend-stationary version of the model from Section 4 (with same parameterization) and for the version with stochastic growth rates, for $\gamma \in \{1, 4.24, 8\}$. This is the analog of Figure 1 from Section 4. The main takeaway is that the elasticity of asset prices with respect to output movements is qualitatively similar in the two specifications as long as the growth rate in the stochastic growth rate case is negatively correlated over time. As before, the elasticity of prices to output movements is larger the greater is the wealth share of the price-elastic middle-aged.⁵⁰

As in the model with shocks to the level of productivity, larger asset price movements – induced either by a smaller IES ($1/\gamma$) or by a larger wealth share of the middle-aged – are associated with

⁵⁰For $\gamma = 1$, the percentage decline in asset prices is equal to that in output in both versions of the model, independent of the wealth distribution A . Thus $\xi \equiv 1$ for both versions of the model when $\gamma = 1$. The same is true ($\xi \equiv 1$) in the stochastic growth rate model whenever the growth rates are iid. See Appendix F.2.

Table 13: WELFARE LOSSES, LEVEL VS. GROWTH RATE RISK (% LIFETIME CONS.)

Age Group	Shocks to z	Shocks to z'/z
Young	2.9	-5.0
Middle	-3.7	-6.0
Old	-12.3	-11.4

more benign welfare consequences for the young. Table 13 summarizes the welfare losses from entering a recession, in both versions of the model, following a long sequence of good shocks (the wealth share of the old is then close to 40%). The table shows that if the output fall has a permanent component, then welfare losses for the young are larger than under the mean-reverting output scenario. In the stochastic growth version of the model it is therefore hard to argue that the youngest generation might actually gain from a large recession. However, the fact that they suffer less than other generations *is* robust across both versions of the model, although the extent to which this is true is more pronounced in the benchmark level-shock specification.

Finally, if 20-year output per capita growth rates were (counter-factually) *positively* correlated, then, at least for the time-separable CRRA preferences with $\gamma > 1$ considered here, the model with growth rate shocks predicts asset price declines that are *smaller* than output declines ($\xi < 1$) and, consequently, welfare losses from a large recession that are *declining* with age. For example, if $\Gamma_{ll} = \Gamma_{hh} = 0.6$, implying a serial correlation of g equal to 0.2, we find that at a wealth share of 40% for the old, $\xi = 0.94$ and welfare losses for the young are 3 percent larger than losses for the old. Thus, this specification of the model reinforces the point that large asset price declines play a central role in mitigating young households' welfare losses from large recessions.

7.2 The Importance of Asymmetric Earnings Losses

In Section 2 we documented that one salient feature of the Great Recession was that earnings losses were concentrated among young households. In this section we demonstrate that our finding of modest, but *positive* welfare losses for the young hinges on this fact. We now display results for an economy identical to the benchmark, but in which all age cohorts face counterfactual *symmetric* income losses of 9.84%, equal to the aggregate income loss (relative to trend) observed in the data. From Table 14 we see that now the young actually gain from a Great Recession (see the third column). Thus, as suggested by the simple three-period model discussed above, the large asset price decline in the recession would actually have left the young better off, had they not been simultaneously disproportionately affected by earnings losses. Even though this is

a counterfactual scenario, it illustrates both the potency of the asset price movement channel as well as the importance of the severe downturn in labor income the youngest cohorts experienced.

Table 14: WELFARE LOSSES, ASYMMETRIC & SYMMETRIC EARNINGS Δ (% LIFET. CONS.)

Age	Benchmark	Sym. Earnings Losses
20-29	-1.07	0.32
30-39	-4.78	-5.04
40-49	-5.69	-5.90
50-59	-7.48	-7.64
60-69	-9.61	-9.74
70+	-10.00	-10.09

The table also shows that the welfare losses of older generations increase only moderately in the symmetric earnings loss scenario. While these cohorts suffer larger labor income declines, the associated welfare costs are moderated by two forces. First, facing more earnings risk, the old choose less risky portfolios. Second, the equilibrium decline in the price of risky assets is smaller in this economy. The reason is that with symmetric earnings losses, young households on the asset demand side of the market are less income poor, and thus prices have to drop less in the recession period to induce these households to buy up the assets. As a result, the elasticity of aggregate asset values to income declines from 2.72 to 2.64.

7.3 Accounting for Intra-Cohort Heterogeneity

Our baseline calibration replicates average income and wealth by age. However, it is well known that a large fraction of aggregate wealth is held by a relatively small fraction of households. Thus, one might wonder whether less wealthy households are likely to experience similar welfare losses across the life cycle. To address this question, we now consider an alternative version of the model in which there are two types of households: a wealthy type and a low-wealth type. We assume that the wealthy type accounts for a fixed fraction κ_y of aggregate labor earnings and passively holds a fixed fraction κ_a of aggregate debt and equity. It follows that the wealthy consume a fixed fraction $(1 - \theta)\kappa_y + \kappa_a\theta$ of aggregate output at each date. Because the wealthy type is assumed to invest passively, assets are priced by the low-wealth type, and prices fluctuate such that this type always demands $(1 - \kappa_a)$ shares and $\kappa_a B$ bonds.

Since the wealthy type accounts for fixed fractions of earnings, asset holdings, and consumption, we can solve for equilibrium allocations by ignoring the wealthy group altogether and simply recalibrating the baseline model to target a lower wealth to labor income ratio corresponding to

$\bar{W}^P = \frac{(1-\kappa_a)}{(1-\kappa_y)}$. We identify the wealthy type with households in the top 10% of the net worth distribution in the 2007 SCF, which implies $\kappa_a = 0.678$, $\kappa_y = 0.334$, and $\bar{W}^P = 0.483\bar{W}$. Retaining our original targets for \bar{R} and $\bar{\lambda}$, implies new values for the supply of bonds and for capital's share of $B^P = 0.0400$ and $\theta^P = 0.1729$.

Given the life-cycle profiles for labor income and for net worth for the low-wealth group, we can follow the procedure outlined in Section 5 to reverse engineer the life-cycle profile $\{\beta_i^P\}$ that rationalizes the implied life-cycle profile for consumption for the low-wealth group. Because this group does less life-cycle saving, its consumption rises less rapidly over the life cycle, and the implied discount factors are therefore smaller. We will focus on the model specification in which agents choose both total savings and the portfolio split between equity and bonds, and report results for earnings losses that are asymmetric and symmetric across ages in the Great Recession. We retain our baseline value for risk aversion, $\gamma = 4.24$.

The equilibrium decline in asset prices in the new low-wealth economy (with asymmetric earnings losses) when the recession hits is 2.48%, slightly smaller than the 2.72% decline in the baseline model. As in the benchmark economy, bond prices hardly move and stock prices fall by close to three times as much as output. Table 15 compares the welfare losses associated with entering a recession in the low-wealth economy with those in the baseline model. The distribution of losses by age is broadly similar to that in the benchmark economy, with the exception that now the youngest generation suffers more significant welfare losses (5% rather than 1%). This reflects two factors. First, the young are now more impatient, and thus care relatively less about the future, when asset prices recover. Second, the young now hold less wealth that will benefit from price recovery in the first place. Thus, the young now evaluate the recession more similarly to hand-to-mouth consumers, for whom the asset pricing channel is less important.

Table 15: WELFARE LOSSES: LOW-WEALTH CALIBRATION (% LIFETIME CONS.)

Age Group	Baseline Wealth		Low Wealth	
	Asym. Δ Earnings	Sym. Δ Earnings	Asym. Δ Earnings	Sym. Δ Earnings
20-29	-1.07	0.32	-5.12	-3.01
30-39	-4.78	-5.04	-6.76	-7.08
40-49	-5.69	-5.90	-7.23	-7.51
50-59	-7.48	-7.64	-8.20	-8.45
60-69	-9.61	-9.74	-9.57	-9.79
70+	-10.00	-10.09	-9.88	-10.03

Comparing the welfare consequences across the different model specifications indicates that

the welfare consequences of the Great Recession for the young are likely quite heterogeneous, depending on the relative importance of the labor market and asset market effects. Those young households not especially severely hurt in the labor market (i.e. those who do not lose their job) and with significant (future) participation in the asset market likely gained from the Great Recession (column 3). On the other hand, young households with more adverse labor market outcomes and with no strong involvement in financial markets faced welfare losses more similar to older households (column 4).

8 Conclusion

These last findings bring us back to the main point of the paper, which is that there is a silver lining for young households in the Great Recession stemming from the dynamics of asset prices. We have argued that this asset price channel is quantitatively important, and that it should therefore be incorporated alongside labor market effects when assessing the distribution of welfare losses from the Great Recession across age groups.

Knowledge about how the welfare costs of recessions are distributed across the age distribution can help inform the discussion of the appropriate policy response. Many of the policies that have been implemented in response to the Great Recession have redistributive consequences across generations. For example, financing an increasing share of the government budget through debt rather than taxation shifts the tax burden toward the young and future generations in life cycle economies, and benefits older age groups. Similarly, the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) and large-scale asset purchases by the Federal Reserve were policies more or less explicitly designed to support asset prices. To the extent that these policies were successful, they disproportionately benefitted wealthier households who tend to be older.⁵¹ Given the age-asymmetric welfare losses we have estimated, a *distributional* argument can be made in favor of such policies.

⁵¹Another important policy response was a dramatic extension of unemployment benefits. On the one hand, this favored younger workers, who bore the brunt of rising unemployment. On the other, older workers are more likely to be eligible to receive benefits. In 2010, the numbers of insured unemployed in the 25-34, 35-44, and 45-54 age groups were very similar (Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration).

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