

A popular explanation for the recent rise in mortgage default is that securitization led to lender moral hazard. According to the story, lending banks that could easily resell loans to (possibly naive) securitizers had little incentive to carefully screen potential borrowers. Some research has supported this view by exploiting what appear to be credit score cutoff rules used by securitizers. In this paper we argue that the cutoff rule evidence has been misinterpreted and is in fact consistent with an equilibrium model where all actors are rational and lender moral hazard is avoided. Even without securitization, cutoff rules emerge endogenously as a rational response of lenders to per-applicant fixed costs in screening. Securitizers' response to lender cutoff rules is determined by the degree of information asymmetry between lender and securitizer. Both institutional evidence and findings from a loan-level dataset containing nearly 60% of active residential mortgages in the United States appear consistent with our model. Discontinuous jumps in mortgage volume and default rate at the FICO credit score of 620 are apparent, implying a change in lender screening behavior at the threshold, but in our main sample of conforming loans there is no corresponding jump in the securitization rate at this score.