In late 2008, a vast interplay of bets, bubbles and blinding greed brought the U.S. economy to the brink of another Great Depression, when some 10,000 of the nation’s banks failed. The crisis began when monster-sized banks couldn’t make good on their bets in the opaque, fast-moving market of mortgage-backed securities they had helped create. After the crisis peaked, the biggest beneficiaries were the banks themselves. In 2010, monster banks reaped record profits and swallowed even more smaller banks.

The Big Picture

The Rise of the Monster Bank

Datagraphic by Nigel Holmes

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The Number of Banks Has Been Falling for 90 Years

The number of U.S. banks of all sizes peaked at 31,000 in 1921, hovered around 14,000 for decades, and began falling again in the late 1980s. Today, the number of banks is one-fourth of the 1921 number.

The Number of Monster Banks Has Been Rising for 25 Years

In 1984, 28 banks had more than $10 billion in assets and held more than a fourth of the industry’s assets. In 1984, only 2 banks had more than $100 billion in assets.

Research by Sarah Richardson