

A Consumer Action Report **The CFPB Consumer Complaint Database**

A lot can be learned from the more than 600,000 consumer complaints that have been logged in the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau’s (CFPB) Consumer Complaint Database since it launched in 2012. Examining complaints filed by others about financial products and services can help you make financially savvy decisions and potentially avoid some costly problems.

In this report, we highlight findings from our analysis of 2015 consumer complaint data for six of the 11 financial products the CFPB regulates. In addition to sharing our research results (page 6), we describe how the database is organized and functions (Section I, below), explain how to use the database (page 14) and present our findings and recommendations (page 20).

I. Complaint process and content

In order for this report and the CFPB’s complaint database to be most useful, it’s important to get familiar with a few important components of the complaint process. Since 2011 the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau has been accepting consumer complaints and forwarding them to the companies named in the complaints. The CFPB tracks company responses and resolutions, and analyzes the complaints for harmful patterns and unfair and deceptive practices. In 2012, the CFPB made the complaints available to the public via its Consumer Complaint Database. It includes 11 main financial products, along with many sub-products.¹

Consumers can submit complaints online, over the telephone, or by mail, fax or email. The most popular way to submit a complaint is online—of the 271,600 complaints submitted in 2015, 71 percent were submitted through the CFPB’s website (<http://www.consumerfinance.gov/data-research/consumer-complaints/>).



(The complaint process. Source: [wwwConsumerFinance.gov](http://www.ConsumerFinance.gov))

¹ Some, but not all, product categories include sub-products. For example, the Mortgage category includes as sub-products: conventional ARM, conventional fixed, FHA mortgage, home equity loan or line of credit, reverse mortgage, second mortgage, VA mortgage and other mortgage.

What information can one find in the database?

The Consumer Complaint Database contains the:

- Date the complaint was submitted by the consumer
- Type of financial product (e.g., credit card, credit report, payday loan, etc.)
- Problem or issue
- Complainant's narrative (optional since June 2015)
- Name of company
- State and ZIP code (full or partial) of consumer
- Category of company's private response to consumer

Ninety-seven percent of consumer complaints receive a response from the company. While response details are not publicly available, they are carefully monitored by the CFPB and are used by the Bureau to help prioritize their oversight and enforcement work. Companies have the following five response options to choose from:

- **Complaint "closed with explanation."** Seventy-two percent of company responses fall into this category. For example, a consumer who submitted a complaint against a credit card issuer because he was denied a credit line increase might receive a written explanation that outlines why his request was not approved.
- **Complaint "closed with monetary relief."** This means the offending company sent a "measurable" dollar amount to the consumer. Monetary relief includes things like refunding a penalty fee.
- **Complaint "closed with non-monetary relief."** Examples of non-monetary relief include things like correcting credit report errors, changing the terms of an account or ceasing debt collection calls.
- **"Closed."** The company closed the complaint without any relief or explanation.
- **"In-progress."** This means the company is reviewing the complaint but cannot respond within 15 days of receiving it. (CFPB expects complaints to be resolved within 60 calendar days.)

Companies can also choose from a handful of administrative responses when they will not be addressing the complaint according to the usual process or at all (for example, if the complaint has been directed to the wrong company or the issue is the subject of a lawsuit).

Other information in the database includes:

- Company's public response: Companies are not required to provide a public response, and most don't. However, those that do can choose from nine standardized responses.
- Whether the consumer provided consent to publish the details of their complaint.
- The date the complaint was forwarded to the company.
- Untimely response: If the company does not meet the 15-day deadline to respond to a complaint, the CFPB will mark it as "untimely."
- Consumer feedback: Consumers can report their dissatisfaction with a company's response to the Bureau. In 2015, 20 percent of consumers who submitted a complaint to CFPB disputed the company's response. Consumers will have the option in 2017 to use a satisfaction rating scale (one to five stars) to provide consumer feedback.

Consumers will also be able to answer a three-question Company Response Survey and choose “Strongly agree” to “Strongly disagree” to the following questions:

- I understood the company’s response.
- The company did what it said it would do.
- The company addressed all of my issues.

The new company rating system will also include a box where consumers can add details as to why they are satisfied or dissatisfied with a company’s response. Consumers can choose to have these feedback details reported publicly, alongside their original complaint narrative.

What’s not in the database?

The database does not contain:

- Complaints that are the subject of a lawsuit
- Complaints referred to other regulators
- Complaints about companies not supervised by the CFPB
- Complaints reported by a company as the “incorrect company” listed in a dispute

Complaint narratives

Since June 2015, consumers have had the choice to include a “narrative,” or personal written explanation of what their complaint is about. Consumer narratives are the heart of the complaint—they explain why a consumer is pursuing a problem, using the individual’s firsthand experience to allow others to understand the issue, put the problem in context and identify harmful patterns across complaints. Only consumers who give the Bureau written permission have their details posted in the database. In 2015, **59 percent** of consumers voluntarily shared their complaint details with the public.

Examples of 2015 complaints with narratives in the database:

Date received	06/10/2015	ZIP code	631XX
Product	Debt collection	Tags	
Issue	Communication tactics	Consumer consent provided?	Consent provided
Consumer complaint narrative	A debt collector is calling my place of employment repeatedly XXXX-XXXXx/day over the course of several weeks. They have called my direct line without leaving a message. They have called the main office line and asked for me by name. An office assistant at my place of work who took the phone call said it was XXXX XXXX # XXXX with Windham professionals. I have received a voicemail from this person on my personal cell phone.		
Company public response			
Company	Windham Professionals	Submitted via	Web
State	MO	Date sent to company	06/10/2015
		Company response to consumer	Closed with non-monetary relief
		Timely response?	Yes
		Consumer disputed?	No
		Complaint ID	1415138

Date received	07/31/2015	ZIP code	940XX
Product	Credit card	Tags	
Issue	Balance transfer fee	Consumer consent provided?	Consent provided
Consumer complaint narrative	I had a debt that I was trying to pay off. In order to pay it off I used a balance transfer check from Capital One in order to have 0 % APR for one year. Five months later I realized that I was getting charged interest of 26 %. I called and they told me that there was some mistake and there is nothing they can do. Essentially, saying I used an expired check. However, I'm pretty certain I did n't use an expired check. I asked for a copy but I'm not getting one. And, they agreed that if the check was expired, it should have never been valid. I called again because it was very clear why I used a balance transfer check. Now they are refusing to return my interest of (\$440.00). They are saying there is nothing they can do.		
Company public response			
Company	Capital One	Submitted via	Web
State	CA	Date sent to company	07/31/2015
		Company response to consumer	Closed with monetary relief
		Timely response?	Yes
		Consumer disputed?	No
		Complaint ID	1496899

How can narratives be valuable?

- Narratives put issues in context, allowing the public to assess the validity of a complaint and draw their own conclusions.
- Complaint details offer a more vivid picture of the problem that cannot be gleaned from other data.
- They provide context for a company's behavior.
- Narratives can help expose harmful patterns, such as discriminatory practices.
- The CFPB relies on complaint details to stay abreast of recurring problems and to create new rules to prevent harmful trends in the future.
- They can be a valuable pre-purchase resource to help consumers make informed decisions about who to do business with.
- Narratives and complaint resolutions (or lack thereof) can help shape others' perceptions of a company. Companies that resolve matters swiftly may benefit financially by boosting their public reputation.

Redaction process

CFPB has a "scrubbing" process that redacts, or removes, certain details from the complaint narratives. This is done to protect consumers' identity and personal information. When a detail is "scrubbed," it appears in the database as a series of Xs ("XXXX").

Here's the type of personal information that the CFPB removes:

- Name, age, race, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, disabilities and medical conditions
- Names of companies not directly related to the complaint
- ZIP codes (entirely redacted in complaints from consumers in small communities, or often just the first three digits will remain)
- Employment information
- Sensitive numbers such as credit card account numbers and Social Security numbers
- Offensive language

Example of what a redacted narrative looks like in the database:

Consumer complaint narrative I closed an account with Delbert Services (DBA XXXX) on XXXX by authorizing payment to be made in full. The transaction is reflected in my checking account. On XXXX XXXX, 2016 I followed the XXXX guidelines for disputing an entry on my credit report. I sent the document via fax (all receipts and confirmations available) expressly requesting that the entry be disputed as their data as of XXXX of 2016 still showed an open account with a {\$10000.00} balance. XXXX has refused to place the issue in dispute or make any changes. I am working to pay my bills but when XXXX and Delbert services throw roadblocks in my way and refuse to even communicate with me it makes it a lot harder.	Company Delbert Services Date sent to company 01/14/2016 Company response to consumer Closed with explanation Timely response? Yes Consumer disputed? Yes Complaint ID 1739878
Company public response Company chooses not to provide a public response	

How companies respond to complaints

Once the consumer submits the complaint, the CFPB reviews it and sends it off to the company named. The company has 15 days to respond, and they are expected to resolve the complaint within 60 days of it being sent.

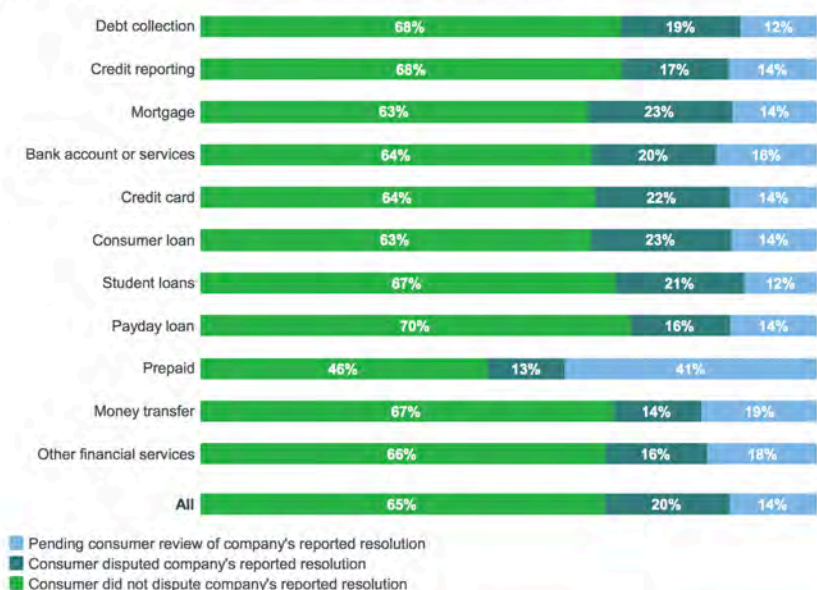
Companies responded to approximately 97 percent of complaints sent to them in 2015. Companies' private responses to consumers, and the CFPB, may include an explanation of the actions they have taken or plan to take. Companies also must choose to file their response under one of the following categories: "Closed with monetary relief," "Closed with non-monetary relief," "Closed with explanation," "Closed," "In progress" or a handful of administrative options (for example, "Incorrect company" or "Duplicate CFPB case reported"). For the purposes of this report, we focused on "Complaint closed with explanation," "Complaint closed with monetary relief" and "Complaint closed with non-monetary relief."

Public company responses

Additionally, companies can choose to respond publicly in the consumer complaint database with one of the following nine standardized public responses. Most companies don't provide a public response.

1. Complaint caused principally by actions of third party
2. Complaint is the result of an isolated error
3. Complaint relates to a discontinued policy or procedure
4. Company believes complaint represents an opportunity for improvement to better serve consumers
5. Company believes it acted appropriately as authorized by contract or law
6. Complaint is a result of a misunderstanding
7. Can't verify or dispute the facts in the complaint
8. Company has responded to the consumer and the CFPB and chooses not to provide a public response
9. Company disputes the facts presented in complaint

FIGURE 21: CONSUMER FEEDBACK ABOUT COMPANY RESPONSES



(Source: Figure 21 from the CFPB's 2015 Consumer Response Annual Report)

Note: The number of complaints a company receives is relative to company size and market share. The CFPB does not adjust complaint data based on number of customers or any other measure. *For step-by-step instructions for using the database, see page 14.*

II. 2015 complaint data overview

We examined the database to help you better understand how to use this first-rate complaint tool and to learn how companies have responded to the consumer complaints they've received. We focused on 2015 complaint data from six of the 11 financial products the CFPB regulates: ***debt collection, credit reporting, mortgages, bank accounts and services, credit cards and student loans***. The bulk of the data we reviewed comes directly from the complaint database and from the CFPB's 2015 Consumer Response Annual Report (January 1, 2015-December 31, 2015).

Bank Accounts and Services

Bank account and service complaints account for 8 percent of all complaints received by the CFPB in 2015. This includes complaints about checking accounts, savings accounts, certificates of deposit and check cashing services. The top three types of bank account/service complaint were:

- Account management (includes opening or closing an account) (42%)
- Deposits and withdrawals (26%)
- Making and receiving payments (13%)

Examples of actual bank account and service complaints received by the CFPB in 2015:

Problem with account management:

— The bank will NOT let me close my account even though it has been no charge for the checking account and now Regions Bank has charged me a monthly fee without using the account. I was waiting for the direct deposit to start depositing into my new bank account to close the account. Now I presume they will keep charging me a monthly fee b/c I have a negative balance.

Problem with depositing or withdrawing funds:

— We closed on a home and needed to forward the funds to our current mortgage. We had the escrow officer deposit the amount to our Wells Fargo account as a cashiers check so it would be available within a day but they are holding it for more than seven days! Our escrow officer said that was illegal to detain our funds and so we are following up with the appropriate agency 's involved.

Problem making or receiving payments:

— A payee to whom I wrote a check erroneously cashed the check twice for different amounts. I called SunTrust to address the issue and over a month later it has not been addressed.

How did companies respond to bank account and service complaints?

- **18 percent** of consumers received monetary relief, at an average of \$105 per complaint.

- **2 percent** received non-monetary relief, such as a change in account terms or the re-opening of an account.
- **72 percent** received an explanation from the company.

Companies chose not to publicly respond to 94 percent of the bank account/service complaints they received. Of those they did respond to publicly, in 4 percent they stated that they “acted appropriately as authorized by contract or law.” Less than 0.5 percent of the complaints were attributed to “an isolated error.”

Credit Cards

Credit card complaints account for 8 percent of all complaints received by the CFPB in 2015. The top three types of credit card complaints were:

- Billing disputes (16%)
- Other (e.g., deferred interest programs, decreased credit limit²) (12%)
- Identity theft, fraud, embezzlement (11%)

Examples of actual credit card complaints:

Problem with account management:

— *Received a letter stating my Chase Credit Card was going to expire within the next two months. Since the card had not been used within [several] years, they were closing the account when it expires. It went on to say if I would like to keep this account open, please call and they would review. I called and after giving them my income and information they were willing to keep the card open at \$1,000 limit whereas before it was \$6,500. They also went on and reduced my other cards from Chase as well taking the limit from \$5,000 to \$1,000. What these actions have done is drastically reduce my credit score from good to below average of which I told them so, but they didn't care stating that was my problem.*

Problem with billing inaccuracies:

— *We have a Bank of America credit card and every month I set up the payment to be taken from our checking account. This month I set the amount to be paid (\$8,700) to come out of our checking account on the due date. It did. The total amount due was \$8,700. However, they also deducted another \$8,700 from our checking account. Fortunately, we had just sold our house, so we had money to cover the double payment! I called them and asked them to put the money back. I was told it would take [several] business days to do so. We were never given an explanation on how this happened, compensated for the use of our money, which I feel is only fair. If we had not sold our house, this would have put our finances and other payments taken from our checking account in serious jeopardy! My greatest fear is that this might happen again with them.*

Problem with fraud:

— *Fraudulent charges were made to my credit card. I had numerous phone conversations with [customer service] assuring me that it would be resolved in my favor.*

² CFPB Oct 2015 Monthly Snapshot, p12 (http://files.consumerfinance.gov/f/201510_cfpb_monthly-complaint-report-vol-4.pdf)

Now I am informed that because I did not contact them in writing I am liable for the fraudulent charges totaling \$26,000.00.

Problem with accounts being closed without knowledge or consent:

— Citibank closed my account without any notice or ability for me to take action that would avoid the closure. I believe this is an example of unfair and deceptive business practices. My account was in good standing and open since 1998. Citibank claimed that the account was closed due to inactivity. There is nothing in the card member agreement that addresses this topic, nor has Citibank disclosed their policies regarding card inactivity.

How did companies respond to credit card complaints?

- **19 percent** received monetary relief, at an average of \$100 per complaint.
- **11 percent** received non-monetary relief, such as a credit line restored or removed, a change in account terms or rates, or having a submission to a credit bureau corrected.
- **64 percent** received an explanation from the company.

Companies chose not to publically respond to 97 percent of the credit card complaints received. Of those they did respond to publically, in 2 percent they stated that they “acted appropriately as authorized by contract or law.” Less than 1 percent of the complaints were thought to be the result of an “isolated error.”

Credit Reporting

Credit reporting complaints accounted for 20 percent of all complaints received by the CFPB in 2015. The top three types of credit reporting complaint were:

- Incorrect information on credit report (79%)
- Credit reporting company’s investigation (8%)
- Unable to obtain credit report or score (6%)

Examples of actual credit reporting complaints:

Problem with incorrect information on credit report:

— Background screening for lease on new house turned up with someone else’s social security number.

Problem with company’s investigation:

— A collection account from XXXX has been misreported on my credit report with Equifax. I have disputed this with Equifax for over XXXX years and it still remains. This collection account has been removed from both XXXX and XXXX and XXXX companies have shared this information with Equifax. However, it still remains on my file with Equifax. I even spoke with a supervisor at Equifax about this. It's time they receive a \$1,000 fine for non-compliance of FTC regulations.

Problem obtaining a credit report:

— I’ve attempted to pull my free annual credit report from Big XXXX Credit Bureau on XX/XX/2015. I was able to promptly receive my copies from XXXX and XXXX, but I could

not obtain a copy from Equifax. After I made a phone call to seek help I was told they could not help me and they had to charge me \$XXXX to obtain a copy.

How did companies respond to credit reporting complaints?

- **Almost no one** received monetary relief; the small number who did received an average of \$23 per complaint.
- **25 percent** received non-monetary relief, including having submissions to credit reporting agencies corrected or having a customer service issue resolved.
- **70 percent** received an explanation from the company.

Companies chose not to publicly respond to 99 percent of the credit reporting complaints they received. Of those they did respond to publicly, in less than half a percent (0.36) the company thought the issue was caused by “the actions of a third party” and in 0.22 percent the company thought they “acted appropriately as authorized by contract or law.”

Debt Collection

Debt collection (medical, credit card, payday loan and other) complaints account for 31 percent of all complaints received by the CFPB in 2015. The top three types of debt collection complaint were:

- Attempts to collect debt not owed (40%)
- Communication tactics (18%)
- Disclosure verification of debt (15%)

Examples of actual debt collection complaints:

Problem with an attempt to collect a debt that is not the complainant’s:

— I paid this medical account in full with the original creditor and I was assured that the collections entry were going to be removed completely from all credit bureaus’ reports. The collection agency is refusing to remove the entry after a full payment was made to the original creditor and the collection agency is reporting the account as a paid collection instead of removing the account as I was told and agreed to.

Problem with debt collectors’ communication tactics:

— Enhanced Recovery Company has been calling my phone non-stop over the last several weeks, presumably about a debt to collect. They refuse to tell me specifically what the calls are about other than a “personal business matter.” I have made it VERY clear to them that we have no business if they can’t provide further details. I want the harassment to stop. Calls always come while I am at work, wasting my time, and my customers’ time.

Problem pertaining to disclosure verification of debt:

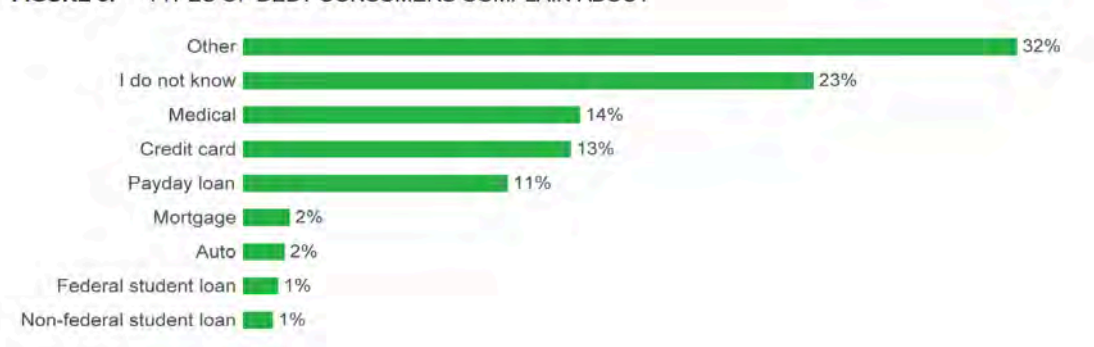
— A company is trying to collect many medical debts, which are also listed on my personal credit report. I have requested several times for verification. This company will not furnish a signed authorization [or proof of the procedures], they just furnish a statement, which proves nothing. I asked to validate the numerous listings on my personal credit file and again all I receive is statements. Many years ago I had [several] medical bills, but they were paid years ago.

How did companies respond to debt collection complaints?

- **1 percent** received monetary relief, at an average of \$317 per complaint.
- **15 percent** received non-monetary relief, including having debt collection calls or other company contact stop or having submissions to a credit bureau corrected.
- **67 percent** received an explanation from the company.

Companies chose not to publically respond to 78 percent of the debt collection complaints they received. Of those they did respond to publically, in 14 percent they stated that they “acted appropriately as authorized by contract or law.” Two percent of the complaints were believed to be “a result of a misunderstanding,” and 2 percent contained details that the company “can’t verify or dispute.” One percent of complaints that received a public response were the result of the “actions of third party.”

FIGURE 5: TYPES OF DEBT CONSUMERS COMPLAIN ABOUT



(Source: The CFPB’s 2015 Consumer Response Annual Report)

Mortgages

Mortgage complaints account for 19 percent of all complaints received by the CFPB in 2015. This includes complaints regarding conventional adjustable rate mortgages, fixed rate mortgages and reverse mortgages. The top three types of mortgage complaint were:

- Problems when unable to pay (43%)
- Making payments (37%)
- Applying for the loan (9%)

Examples of actual mortgage complaints:

Problem related to inability to pay or obtain a loan modification:

— *I have been trying to work with Citi mortgage to obtain a loan modification to stay in my home. However they have not been willing to help me. The service department has lost my file XXXX different times and claimed that I never started a loan modification. They have issued me just in the last seven months XXXX different customer support specialist who would not return my phone calls and would not return email in a timely manner. Out of the blue they pulled her out of the case and then we got a different representative, who seemed to be very kind, understanding, and very accommodating. With XXXX, over the last several months we were able to get all of the documentation to her in order to complete the loan modification. XXXX indicated that she has submitted all the paperwork to underwriting department. XXXX gave me the reassurance that she*

would do anything that she could to keep me in my home. Citi Mortgage went ahead again and switched customer support specialist to (XXXX) which will not return our phone calls or emails. I have called her everyday, I was lucky one day and she actually picked up the phone. She asked my information and my loan number, as soon as she identified who I was she stated that she was on the other line. It has been over a week and I have still haven't heard back from XXXX. I just received a letter from XXXX and XXXX, which is a firm that has been retained to conduct a non-judicial foreclosure sale. I am absolutely shocked, I was just told thirty days ago that all of the paperwork that I submitted looked very good and they were going to do anything to keep me in my home. Now my case has been sent over to a law firm for foreclosure proceedings. I know this is definitely against the law, and they are committing fraud. They have not tried to help me, they don't communicate with me, they keep switching my file around to different individuals within the company with no resolution.

Problem with making payments:

— Penny Mac consistently misapplies my payments. I generally pay more than the minimum. They apply it all to principal, add late fees, call me for payment, when the full amount+ is always sent in WAY before the due date. Then I have to spend too much time on the phone getting fees reversed and explaining to them how to apply the payment correctly. If it didn't cost me money, I would switch companies in a heartbeat.

Problem applying for a mortgage:

— Amerisave Mortgage Corporation offered me a very attractive interest rate for refinancing my mortgage. I went ahead and applied for the loan as they guaranteed rate lock for a period of 60 days. They asked me to pay \$420.00 for payment towards appraisal immediately. I also submitted online all the documents they requested. Then they sat on my application for almost two months. When I followed up, they said they were busy with too many applications and offered to extend rate lock since they were delaying it. They did extend but kept delaying it further and coming back and asking some document or other. Today they sent me mail saying that rate lock expired and I will have to go for whatever rate exists now. On top of it they are also asking me to pay for appraisal again saying that my appraisal report expired.

How did companies respond to mortgage complaints?

- **3 percent** received monetary relief, at an average of \$500 per complaint.
- **5 percent** received non-monetary relief, including being offered foreclosure alternatives (without direct monetary value) or having a customer service issue resolved.
- **81 percent** received an explanation from the company.

Companies chose not to publically respond to 87 percent of mortgage complaints. Of those they did respond to publically, in 8 percent the company believed it “acted appropriately as authorized by contract or law.” One percent of the complaints were believed to be the result of “an isolated error.”

Student Loans

Student loan complaints accounted for 3 percent of all complaints received by the CFPB in 2015. The top three types of student loan complaint were:

- Dealing with lender or servicer (62%)
- Can't repay loan (33%)
- Getting a loan (5%)

Examples of actual student loan complaints:

Problem dealing with lender or servicer:

— I am a co-signer on my son's student loan. During the consolidation process Wells Fargo advised us not to make a payment, and that a late fee would be assessed. After the loan was consolidated, I called to have the late fee reversed—it was not. The inclusion of the late fee caused the principal balance and the minimum payment to be greater than it otherwise would have been. I have been repeatedly promised that the error would be corrected. It has not been corrected. In addition, there is no way to set up automatic payments, or access account information without my son 's permission even though I am a co-signer on the loan.

Problem repaying a loan:

— AES refuses to assist me with a reasonable payment option for my ALPLN loan. I am not able to make the current amount (it is an entire paycheck at my current wage) and they simply state there is no other option. If the current situation continues it will cause great undue hardship upon my family and me. Take note that I have made timely payments since for years now. I sincerely asked that they provide me with another option and they stated I had used all my options. They offered to lower another loan amount (only temporary), but of course that would lead to paying a greater amount of interest on that loan leaving me worse off than I am currently. I want to repay my debt however they make it impossible, the interest rates are completely unaffordable.

Problem applying for a loan:

— I applied to have my student loan refinanced...and the company quoted me at a rate of 5.2%, but when the loan was approved the rate was increased to 6.86% with no explanation even though I have an excellent credit score. When I asked the representative to investigate why the rate changed she said she would check with the underwriting department and get back to me. That was two weeks ago and now she is ignoring me. This is a classic example of "bait & switch."

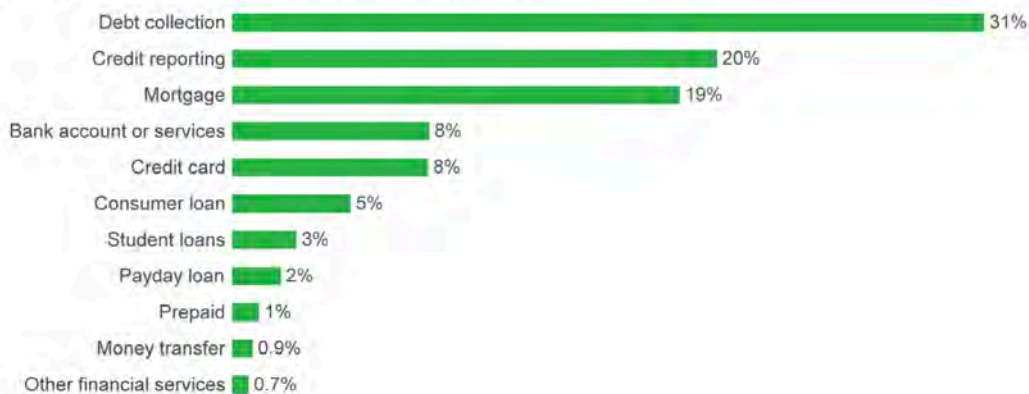
How did companies respond to student loan complaints?

- **5 percent** received monetary relief, at an average of \$173 per complaint.
- **6 percent** received non-monetary relief, including receiving a change in account terms or having a customer service issue resolved.
- **83 percent** received an explanation from the company.

Companies chose not to provide a public response 78 percent of the time. Of those they did respond to publically, in six percent of the cases the company believed the complaint was due to "actions of third party," and in 5 percent the company believed it "acted appropriately as

authorized by contract or law.” In 1 percent, the company thought the complaint was due to an “isolated error.”

FIGURE 4: CONSUMER COMPLAINTS BY PRODUCT¹⁰



(Source: The CFPB’s 2015 Consumer Response Annual Report; may not total 100 percent due to rounding)

When to use the database

Before purchase/use

Reviewing complaint narratives *before* doing business with a particular company can help consumers evaluate the company based on others’ firsthand experiences and avoid problems. For example, Sofia, from New York, was looking for a money transfer service to send and receive money for a side business. She decided to use the CFPB database to review customers’ experiences with MoneyGram and Western Union, two money transfer businesses. She filtered complaints first by company, and then by complaint narratives from New York. She noticed that there are nearly three times as many fraud and scam complaints for MoneyGram as there are for Western Union (despite Western Union being the larger company), so decided to choose Western Union for her business.

After purchase/use

Consumers might also examine database details to evaluate a company they’re currently having problems with to compare their experience with that of other consumers. The database also allows consumers to report unreasonable, unfair or deceptive practices and alert others. For example, John took out a student loan with Wells Fargo five years ago. Due to unemployment after graduation, he struggled to make the loan’s monthly payments. He tried numerous times to refinance his loan to lower the monthly payments. Despite multiple phone calls and emails, the bank continued to refuse his request to modify the loan. He filtered the CFPB database to review student loan complaints with Wells Fargo and read some of the consumer narratives:

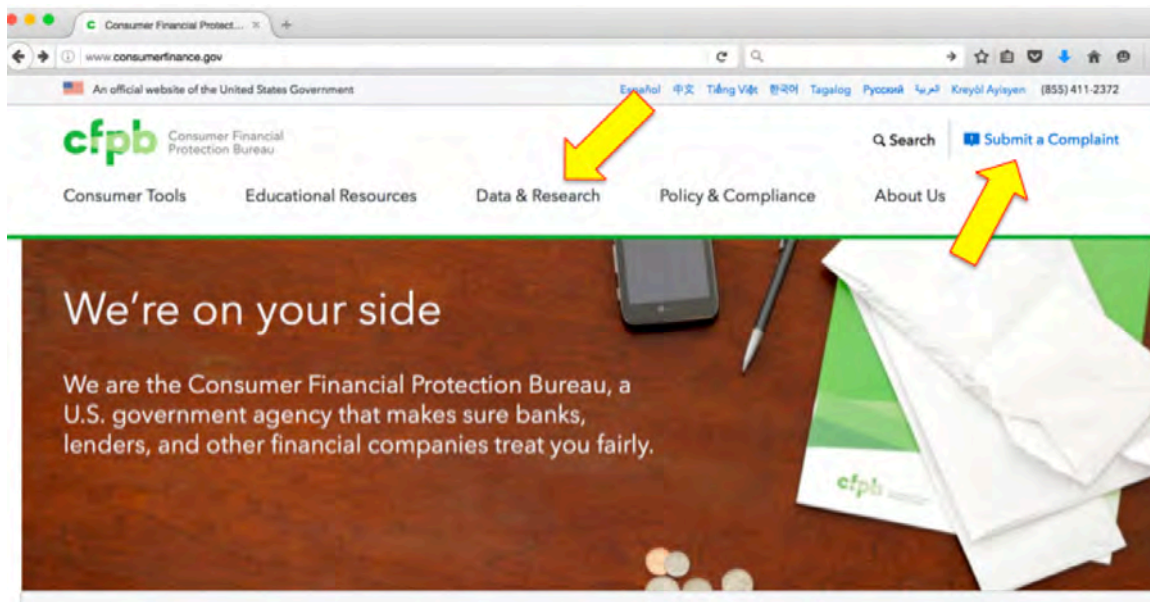
— Since graduation I have struggled to pay my student loans, due to terms of unemployment and low-wage paying jobs. I am in a better situation than I was six years ago but still struggle to pay my monthly payment. This has brought down my credit and increased the interest on my loan. I have tried numerous times to refinance my loan to bring down the payment to a more manageable monthly rate, each time Wells Fargo, who holds my loans, denied the request. With this I am on the verge of going into deferment with my loans. This is an issue many of us our dealing with. Who can help us?

— Three years ago, when my spouse lost her full time job, I started negotiating with Wells Fargo to refinance a student loan or lower the interest rate or increase the remaining period to reduce the minimum monthly payment amount because it is very hard for me to pay. They never agreed, but they frightened me by threatening to increase the interest, while the interest is supposed to be fixed!! Is there a solution?

Based on database details, John decided to file his own complaint with the CFPB and include his own narrative, hoping to receive help to refinance his student loan. He also hoped to alert the CFPB and other consumers of Wells Fargo’s reluctance to refinance customers who are struggling to pay their loans.

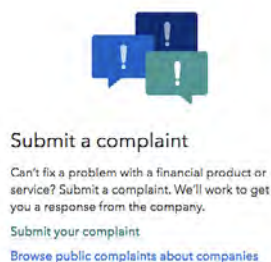
III. How to use the Consumer Complaint Database

1. Go to the official Consumer Financial Protection Bureau website: (<http://www.consumerfinance.gov>).



2. Click on “Data & Research” in the header and select “Consumer Complaint Database” from the dropdown list to view the database. (To submit a complaint, choose the blue link in the top right corner of the homepage.)


Alternatively, you can scroll down the page (see graphic below) and click on the “Browse public complaints about companies” link under “Submit a complaint.”





3. The complaint database homepage offers you three options:

Consumer Complaint Database

Each week we send thousands of consumers' complaints about financial products and services to companies for response. Those complaints are published here after the company responds or after 15 days, whichever comes first. By adding their voice, consumers help improve the financial marketplace.

1  Consumers have let us know they want to share their complaint descriptions so others can learn from their experience.

2  View, sort, and filter data right in your browser.

3  All complaint data we publish is freely available for anyone to use, analyze, and build on.

[Read consumer narratives](#) [View complaint data](#) [Download options and API](#)

(1) Read consumer narratives; (2) View complaint data; or (3) Download options and API.

Option 1: If you choose “Read consumer narratives,” you will see *only* complaints where consumers have included a complaint narrative (complaint details). This view also reveals the company’s standardized response, if any.

Option 2: To view all complaint data for all financial products/services, click on the middle icon, “View complaint data.” Users have the ability to filter complaints by product, by narrative and by other categories of data.

Option 3: This option allows users to download all complaint data into an Excel file. This option is typically used for in-depth research.

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4. While on the Consumer Complaint Database homepage (<http://www.consumerfinance.gov/data-research/consumer-complaints/>), you can scroll down to the row of icons to review complaint details by product category. For example, a consumer can click on the “Credit reporting” icon (hover over each icon with your cursor to see the category name appear), then the “See Credit reporting complaint data” link below to see only the data for that complaint category.

Consumers' experiences in their own words

These are real complaints from consumers who have opted to share their descriptions of what happened. The complaints were pulled randomly from the database.

Credit reporting complaint Next complaint: Debt collection >

CONSUMER COMPLAINT NARRATIVE

Dear sir/madam, as I was going through my credit report on XXXX and Transunion few months ago, then I noticed a negative report on my credit. The negative report was from a Company called XXXX XXXX XXXX any time I dispute the account, they kept sending a letter at my home address saying they investigated the dispute and notice it was mine. First I have never had any account with XXXX XXXX. Second, They have to explain which address I was living when I acquired this dept. I do n't know how they got my social security and my date of birth because I know I have never had any account with XXXX XXXX or any of it affiliates. I am requesting that XXXX XXXX XXXX or any of their affiliates should remove such negative statement from my credit report

COMPANY PUBLIC RESPONSE

Company chooses not to provide a public response

[See credit reporting complaint data >](#)

SUB-PRODUCT
None

ISSUE
Incorrect information on credit report

STATE
IL

DATE RECEIVED
6/19/2015

COMPANY RESPONSE TO CONSUMER
Closed with explanation

5. You can filter the complaint information using the (1) gray header or (2) the filter tool in the blue box on the right side of the screen.

CFPB Consumer Financial Protection Bureau

Credit Reporting Complaints with Consumer Complaint Narratives

Based on Consumer Complaints
Each week we send thousands of consumers' complaints about financial products and services to companies for response.

Filter

Filter this dataset based on contents.

No conditions defined yet.

+ Add a New Filter Condition

With the following base filters:

Product is Credit Reporting

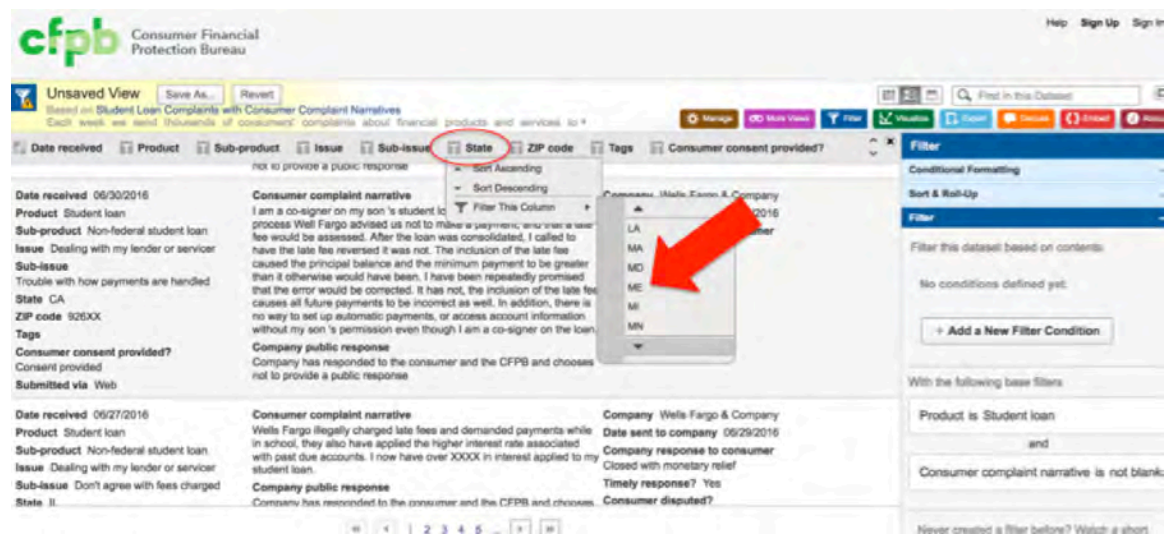
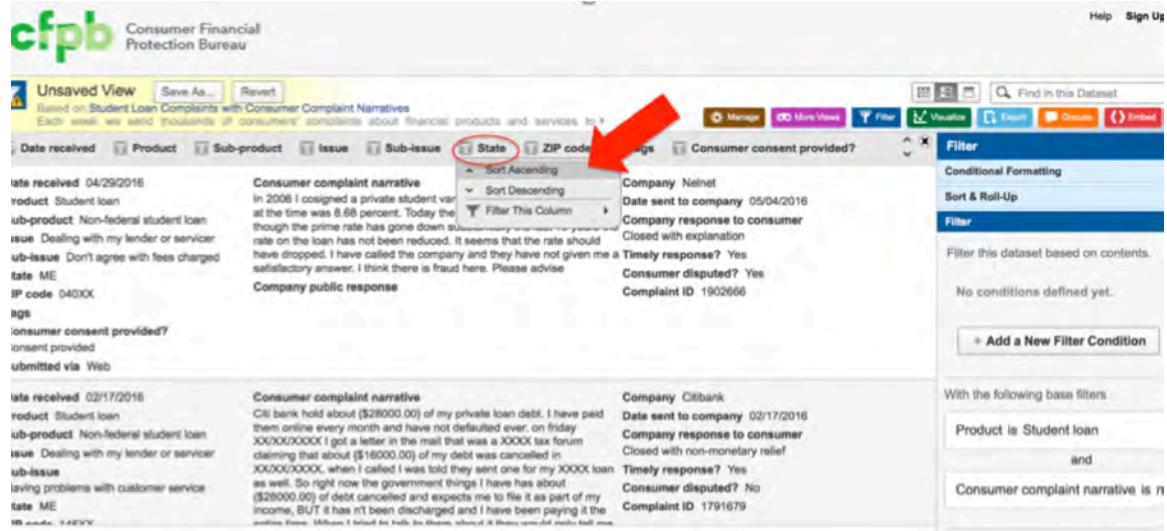
and

Consumer complaint narrative is not blank

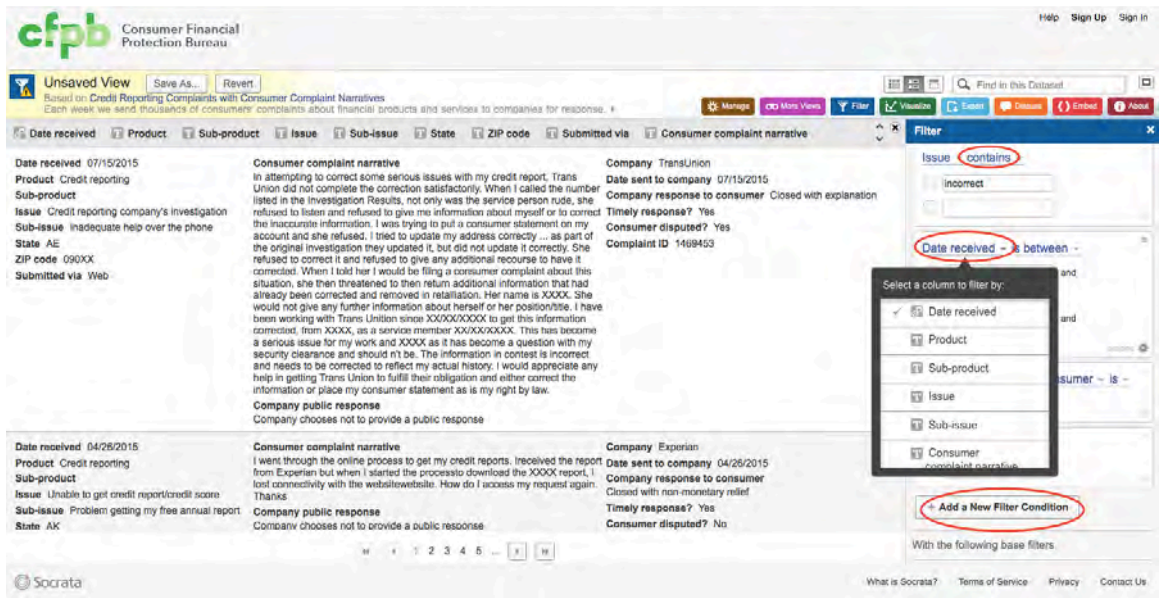
Never created a filter before? Watch a short tutorial video here.

The (1) gray header (row above complaint listings) lists the different categories of data. You can organize the data in ascending or descending order (for example, from A to Z or from Z to A) as well as filter narratives according to the corresponding sub-categories that pertain to your search. If you are interested in seeing narratives that come from a particular state, Maine, for example, choose “ME” from the dropdown list that appears when you click the Menu icon to

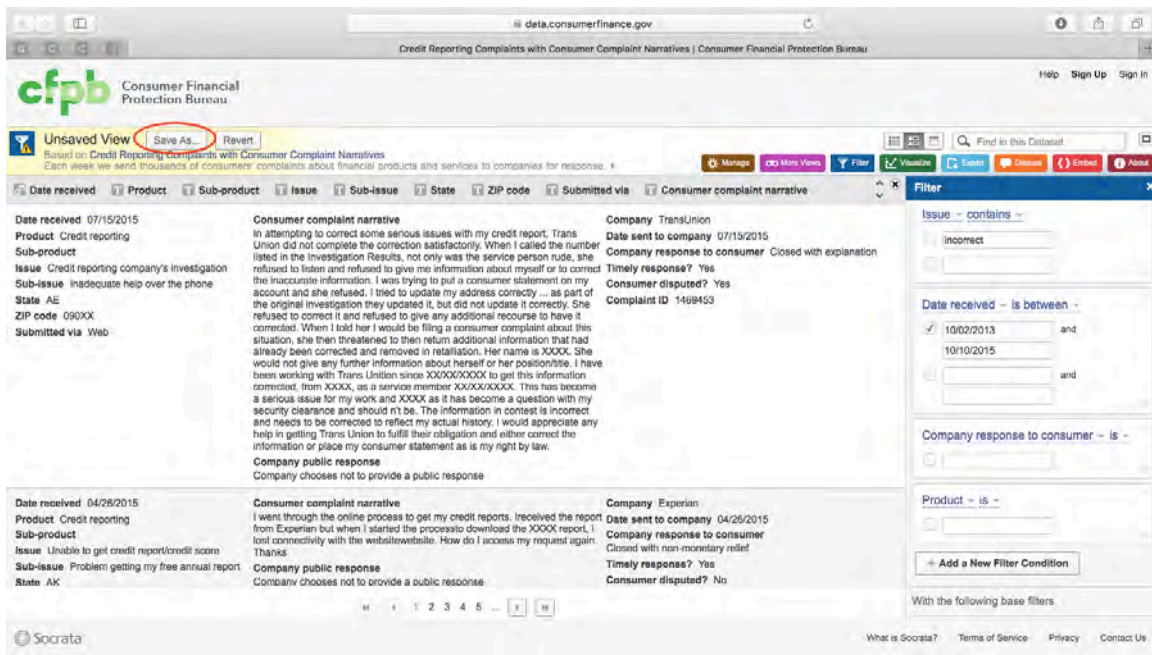
the right of the word “State” and then select “Filter This Column.” Or, if you are interested in seeing all the information in the database in alphabetical order according to state, choose “Sort Ascending.” To remove a filter, click on the small red “T” symbol in the gray bar or select “Clear Sort” from the dropdown menu. Then you can choose another filter.



6. The blue filter box on the right side of the browser screen (click the blue Filter button above the gray header if it doesn’t appear automatically) can be used when performing more complex filtering. The box allows for multiple filter conditions to be applied to the data at once. You can “Add a New Filter Condition” and choose criteria that will filter out any entry that does not match your search conditions. For example, show “Credit reporting” complaints dealing with “Incorrect information” by “Year.” Use the word “contains” instead of “is” to avoid relevant data being filtered out due to slight variations in text (an extra space, different capitalization, etc.). For example, if you want to read complaints where “Fraud or scam” is the sub-issue but you choose “Sub-issue” “is” from the filter menu and write just “fraud” in the search box, your search would turn up no results since the sub-issue is, by default, “Fraud or scam.” If you instead conducted a search that looked for “Sub-issue” “contains” “fraud,” your search would generate the results you are looking for. Avoid adding extra spaces at the beginning or end of your search terms to prevent errors.



7. After filtering the complaints, you can browse and even save your filtered search (if you set up a free account before searching).



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8. For the best results when searching for complaints about a company that is owned by another company, search the “Consumer complaint narrative” column, not the “Company” column. When adding a filter condition, choose “Consumer complaint narrative” and choose “contains” from the dropdown menu. Then type the desired company name in the search box. In some cases, the names of companies that are owned by other companies will only appear in the “Consumer complaint narrative” column because the “Company” column lists the name of the parent company (for example, with prepaid cards and specialty consumer reporting bureaus).

The screenshot displays the CFPB Consumer Financial Protection Bureau dashboard. At the top left is the CFPB logo and the text "Consumer Financial Protection Bureau". On the right, there are links for "Help", "Sign Up", and "Sign In". Below the header, there is a navigation bar with "Unsaved View", "Save As...", and "Revert" buttons. A search bar labeled "Find in this Dataset" is also present. The main area shows a data table with three columns: "Consumer complaint narrative", "Company public response", and "Company". The table contains 13 rows of data, with the "Company" column listing "Empowerment Ventures, LLC" for all entries. On the right side, a "Filter" panel is open, showing a filter condition for "Consumer complaint narrative" with the operator "contains" circled in red. The filter also includes a search box with "rush" entered and a "Product" filter with "prepaid card" selected.

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IV. Findings and recommendations for the CFPB Consumer Complaint Database

Consumer Action has worked to encourage the CFPB to make its public complaint database as useful, transparent and powerful as possible. Over the last five years, the Bureau has expanded the database's functions and information. Its existence is an important way for consumers to evaluate a business and alert others to problems. However, we believe there is more work to be done to make this first-rate tool even more helpful to consumers.

Consumer Action's review of the CFPB complaint database found it to be "clunky" to use at times and aesthetically uninviting. When filtering the data to target a search we often had no results appear; the tool was sensitive to spacing variations and sometimes difficult to use. We often had to restart our search, which wastes time and frustrates user.

Information about complaint outcomes is sparse. Most of the very limited information on complaint resolutions was found in the CFPB Consumer Response Annual Report, and even there details are insufficient. Consumers cannot learn what solutions are working with certain companies and can acquire no findings on why consumers dispute complaints (now called "feedback"). (The Bureau plans to add a consumer satisfaction rating scale and narrative where complainants can rate how pleased or displeased they were with the outcome of their complaint and explain why.)

While consumers receive responses from companies 97 percent of the time, pure complaint resolutions are dismally low. As of January 2016, only 6 percent of complaints received monetary relief and 12 percent received non-monetary relief. Amounts of monetary relief vary by category (Prepaid Cards: 24 percent monetary relief; Mortgages: 3 percent). Private explanations from the company to the consumer accounted for 72 percent of responses. These might include things like why the consumer did not receive a credit line increase, why they were denied a loan or how the bank's overdraft process works.

These issues do not negate the value of the database. It contains critical information for both consumers and regulators. For example, our intern learned from studying the complaint narratives (details of the complaint) that many consumers struggle to have credit reporting errors removed from their credit bureau files. This exposed him to the need to check his credit reports regularly to ensure accuracy, especially since a consumer's access to loans and credit (often jobs and insurance) are reliant on the data in our credit reports. Likewise, regulators are able to learn from the data how well the market is working, particularly in regard to individual companies' financial products and services, both in general as well as in distinct communities.

Based on what we've learned, we've compiled a list of suggestions to improve the utility of this valuable tool.

- 1. Include *all* complaints.** All complaints filed with the CFPB should be part of the public database, including complaints referred to other agencies or involved in a lawsuit. All complaints should also be listed by the specific company the consumer complained about, not only by the parent company's name.

2. Increase and improve information on consumer relief.

- a. Add in-depth relief and resolution information. This information is not currently available in the database, and very limited relief information is in the CFPB's complaint annual report.
- b. Include details about the resolutions consumers have received:
 - i. **Monetary relief:** Show dollar amounts received, the type of complaint filed and the company in question.
 - ii. **Non-monetary relief:** List the specific action taken by the company (for example, "Error removed from credit bureau records," "account terms changed," etc.).

3. **Release explanations.** Seventy-two percent of consumers in 2015 received an explanation from the company in response to their complaint. Details from these explanations should be transparent to consumers. The Bureau should provide the public with the primary explanations consumers are receiving (examples might include why a credit line was not increased or a loan was denied). If companies are not providing complainants with tailored responses as required, the Bureau should publically disclose which companies have not complied. This is helpful information for consumers who are choosing which companies to work with.
4. **Include details in public company responses.** If a company believes that a third party was at fault, it would be helpful to learn specifics from the company's perspective. This would help distinguish legitimate company claims from those that take advantage of the opportunity to shift responsibility to another party.
5. **Note third-party referrals.** Credit bureaus, debt collection agencies and other companies that frequently respond to consumer complaints by attributing responsibility to a third party should be compelled to provide the consumer with the name and contact information of the third party to expedite complaint resolution.
6. **Improve communication with complainants.** If a company does not respond to a consumer complaint, the Bureau should report it in the database as "No response." This should include companies that do not respond within 60 days of receiving a complaint. It should be easy for consumers to see the percentage of complaints to which a specific company does not respond in a timely manner or at all.
7. **Reveal the company's complaint handling history.** The Bureau should make it possible for consumers to clearly see in the database how individual companies are handling the complaints they receive. A company "snapshot" could include an overview of response times, explanations and relief (monetary and non-monetary). Consumers could use this information to evaluate whether a company is worth doing business with, based in part on how well they address complaints. (The upcoming satisfaction rating system should help.)
8. **Enable mobile access.** Many consumers access the internet primarily via a mobile device (smartphone or tablet) rather than a computer. Enhancing smartphone capability is a

must for any useful complaint tool. The search capabilities should not be restricted and viewing should not be compromised for those using smaller screens.

- 9. Offer simple, step-by-step instructions and update the filter tutorial video for new users.** A brief introduction for those using the database in their web browser would be very helpful for consumers who may otherwise see the system as daunting. Instructions should encourage users to keep searches simple; highlight commands for rearranging columns or searching data by keyword, company or product; and include useful “tips,” like *“When adding filter conditions to the blue filter sidebar, avoid using “is”; instead click on the tiny arrow and select the word “contains” for best results.”*
- 10. Improve functionality.** Make filtering the data easier and faster. Make changes that avoid the opportunity for users to become frustrated by an overly sensitive filter, lack of desired results or need to restart searches from scratch. Make the interface more intuitive for the layperson.
- 11. Relax the scrubbing standard.** While consumer privacy is imperative, sometimes too much information is redacted from complaint details (dates, times and numbers), and what’s removed often seems inconsistent.
- 12. Require complaint resolutions.** Require *all* companies supervised by the CFPB to adequately respond to and attempt to resolve consumer complaints within the 15- and 60-day time frames. The CFPB should pursue companies that do not respond to or resolve consumer complaints and hold them more accountable. The Bureau could follow up with unresponsive companies directly and press them to provide more detailed, tailored responses (and resolutions), both publicly and privately. If no progress is made, the business should be slated for scrutiny by the agency’s supervision and examination staff. Businesses should be examined and expected to have a complaint *escalation* process that consumers can turn to for resolution, as is now required of mortgage servicers.
- 13. Offer further recourse.** When complaint resolution is not available to consumers, the Bureau should provide written suggestions as to where the consumer might turn next for recourse (e.g., state AG, small claims court, trade association/FINRA, etc.).
- 14. Publicize Bureau actions taken as a direct result of complaints.** When further CFPB action (e.g., lawsuit, settlement, new rule) results from a consumer complaint, the consumer should be notified directly by the Bureau in a timely manner. The action should be reported to the public, as well, to expand awareness and use of the complaint tool.
- 15. Dispute option.** The Bureau should provide one last step in the complaint process that offers consumers stronger recourse if a company has been unresponsive to their complaints. If a consumer provides the CFPB with detailed negative feedback in the upcoming satisfaction rating scale, the Bureau should consider taking further action against a company that has numerous unresolved or outstanding (no response) complaints. Action could include private communication between the Bureau and the business, deeper examination or investigation of the company or, if warranted, enforcement action.

Consumer Action

www.consumer-action.org

Consumer advice and referral hotline: 415-777-9635

Chinese, English and Spanish spoken

Submit your complaints online:

English: www.consumer-action.org/hotline/complaint_form/

Spanish: www.consumer-action.org/hotline/complaint_form_es/

About this report

Research was conducted between February and July 2016 by Josue Chavez (2016 Columbia University Virtual Intern) and the following staff members: Alegra Howard, Ruth Susswein and Monica Steinisch.

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