

January 20, 2015 Article from Sun Sentinel

## Equity returning for South Florida homeowners

By **Paul Owers**

Sun Sentinel

**contact the reporter**

More South Florida homeowners became "equity rich" by the end of 2014, giving them options they haven't enjoyed since the housing boom.

In the fourth quarter, 90,263 [Broward County](#) mortgage holders had at least 50 percent equity in their properties, up from 78,813 a year ago, according to a report Thursday from RealtyTrac Inc., a foreclosure listing firm in Irvine, Calif.

In [Palm Beach County](#), 78,970 homeowners had 50 percent equity or higher, compared with 69,100 in the fourth quarter of 2013.

Those numbers provide yet more evidence of the turnaround in South Florida's housing market, which crashed harder than most in the recession.

Thousands of homeowners lost equity when prices nose-dived after a historic run-up from 2000 to 2005. Those who bought or refinanced between 2004 and 2006 were especially hurt.

Many found themselves "underwater," owing more than their properties were worth. They couldn't sell without bringing money to the closing table — or setting prices artificially high to make up the difference.

An increase in home values over the past two years has changed the game, making it easier for people to test the market.

Dean Ehrlich, an agent for RE/MAX ParkCreek who also sells in both counties, said he's already listed five homes for sale in January and expects to list at least two more.

"This is going to be one of my biggest listing months in years," Ehrlich said. "And if I had talked to these people two or three years ago, it would have been a totally different story."

[Broward County](#)'s median price for existing homes in November was \$267,000, 27 percent higher than November 2012, according to the Greater Fort Lauderdale Realtors.

Over the same period, [Palm Beach County](#)'s median price has increased 22 percent, from \$218,000 to \$265,012, according to the Realtors Association of the Palm Beaches.

Meanwhile, the number of people seriously underwater is falling.

In the fourth quarter, Broward had 126,434 mortgage holders who were in the hole by at least 25 percent, but that's down from 164,366 a year earlier.

In [Palm Beach County](#), there were 88,941 seriously underwater homeowners, compared with 123,983 at the end of 2013.

Daren Blomquist, a vice president of RealtyTrac, estimates that it will take three to five years for seriously underwater homeowners to regain enough equity to sell. A slower rise in prices in 2015 is mostly to blame, Blomquist said.

[Powers@sunsentinel.com](mailto:Powers@sunsentinel.com), 561-243-6529 or Twitter @paulowers