

Global Investment Manager Analysis | January 21, 2022

Private Investments in the Secondary Market



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The original version of this report was published on May 25, 2017, with subsequent updates on June 6, 2018, June 6, 2019 and June 22, 2020.

As private investments establish themselves as complementary additions to diversified portfolios, they present investors with unique challenges in the areas of cash flow management, diversification and liquidity. Helping to offset some of these challenges, secondary investments have become effective tools for investors seeking to access the potentially attractive returns offered in private investments such as private equity, real estate, credit and infrastructure. With diversification and attractive cash-flow profiles, secondary investments are becoming more appealing for investors looking to better manage current exposure or to establish portfolios of private investments or augment those portfolios. Morgan Stanley Wealth Management Global Investment Manager Analysis (GIMA) believes this strategy offers compelling benefits to investors and deserves consideration as a strategic allocation in investors' portfolios.

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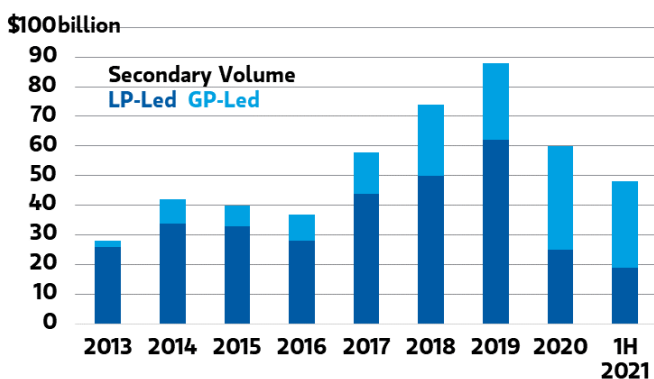
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Evolution of the Secondary Market

For nearly two decades, institutional and high-net-worth investors have embraced private investments for their return potential and lower correlation to the capital markets. While private investments offer diversification and an uncommon potential return profile, one of the main drawbacks is their lack of liquidity, as investors typically cannot access their capital for 10 or more years. Responding to this illiquidity, limited partners (LPs) and general partners (GPs) of private equity funds have turned to the secondary market for their respective portfolio management needs.

According to advisory firms Greenhill and Jefferies, secondary transaction volume has grown substantially over the years. This increase in volume, primarily in the form of private equity strategies, is a function of the strategy serving as a growing tool for managers of illiquid assets as well as a viable private investment tool. In 2020, annual volume of secondary transactions fell to \$60 billion (see Exhibit 1), which was generally the result of market disruptions from COVID-19. Secondary volume appears to have rebounded in 2021.

Exhibit 1: Secondary Market Growth Has Been Buoyant



Source: Greenhill Global Secondary Market Review—January 2021, Jefferies Global Secondary Market Review—July 2021

The secondary market has grown to encompass a wide array of transaction types through LP-led and GP-led deals. LP-led transactions occur when LPs sell their private fund interests to secondary market investors to generate liquidity or to use them as portfolio management tools in order to rebalance their private equity portfolio exposure while redeploying capital to higher-conviction areas. Historically, LP-led deals have accounted for the majority of transaction volume.

GP-led transactions allow GPs to drive the process of providing LPs with liquidity by facilitating the sale of LP interests to secondary market investors. They may also facilitate the sale of specific assets later in a fund's life so

these assets can be moved into a new vehicle alongside a secondary market investor as an alternative exit route. While LPs get liquidity in this situation, one benefit for GPs is the ability to extend the management period of high-quality assets that may have the potential for further value creation but might otherwise need to be sold due to limited fund lifespan. GP-led transaction volume has grown as a percentage of total secondary volume—from 7% in 2013 to 60% by mid-2021. Market participants expect that GP-led transactions will continue to gain an increasing share of secondary market volume as GPs continue to view the secondary market as a valuable and strategic liquidity tool.

Investment Merits

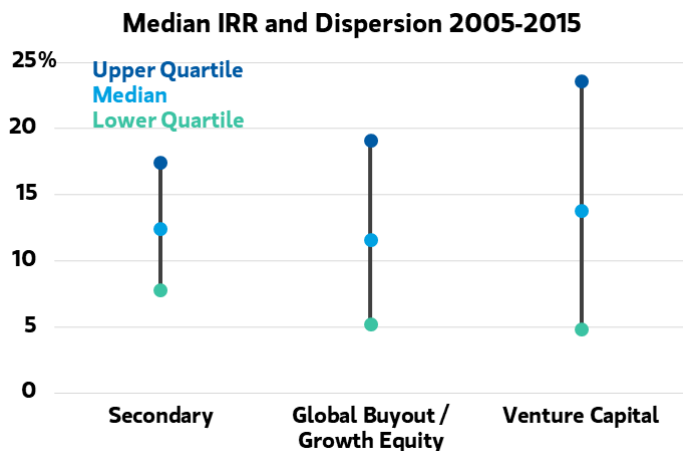
How do investors better manage their private investment exposure, and, equally as important, what is the opportunity for investment managers? Private investments are utilized for their combination of diversification and return potential. Increasingly, investors have looked for ways to monetize their private investment capital for both economic and noneconomic reasons. The secondary market offers an outlet for investors seeking liquidity and fertile ground for fund managers seeking unique assets. While investors with private investment positions find the secondary market useful, we are increasingly seeing asset managers eager to adopt this opportunistic strategy.

Managers of secondary funds provide liquidity to investors who would otherwise be locked up while accessing assets with compelling attributes. These attributes include asset availability at a discount; partially seasoned investments, which helps mitigate the "J-curve"—the historical tendency of private equity funds to deliver negative returns in early years and gains in outlying years, as assets mature; and potentially improved cash flows. If the portfolio manager is doing his or her job correctly, investors can reap the above benefits in the form of higher internal rates of return (IRR) and lower IRR dispersion relative to other private market strategies.

To this point, secondary funds have exhibited favorable risk/return profiles, though with lower multiples of invested capital, generating a 12.4% median IRR and 960 basis points of dispersion between the top and bottom quartile, on average, from 2005 through 2015, according to Cambridge Associates. This compares to an 11.6% median IRR and 1,390 basis points of dispersion in returns for global buyout/growth equity funds and 13.8% median IRR and 1,880 basis points of dispersion in returns for global venture capital (see Exhibit 2). It is important to note that while the median IRRs are significant in newer vintages, spreads will naturally tighten as these secondary funds mature.

PRIVATE INVESTMENTS IN THE SECONDARY MARKET

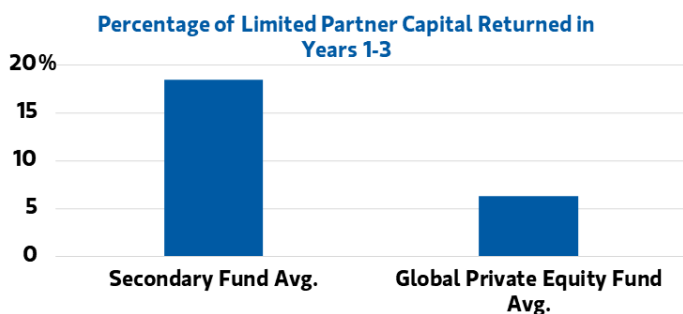
Exhibit 2: Secondaries Have Delivered a Favorable Risk-Return Profile



Source: Cambridge Associates, Thomson Reuters Eikon as of March 31, 2021

One of the more attractive attributes of investing in the secondary market is accelerated cash flow. In a typical primary private investment fund, investors experience a gradual drawdown of capital during the first few years, and positive returns are generally not reported until roughly five years after the initial contribution. Investors must wait even longer for any type of meaningful distributions. Secondary investments can still be long-life assets, though the pattern of cash flows is often different. Secondary funds typically purchase more seasoned assets, which often lead to earlier distributions. Accordingly, secondary funds have returned approximately 19% of LP capital in the first three years of the secondary fund's life, on average, compared to approximately 6% for global buyout/growth equity funds, based on Cambridge Associates data for mature vintage years 2005 to 2015, as of March 31, 2021 (see Exhibit 3). The end result is that investors in secondary portfolios may experience smoother return patterns and earlier distributions than those investing in traditional private investments.

Exhibit 3: Secondary Funds May Return Capital Faster



Represents vintage year funds 2005-2015

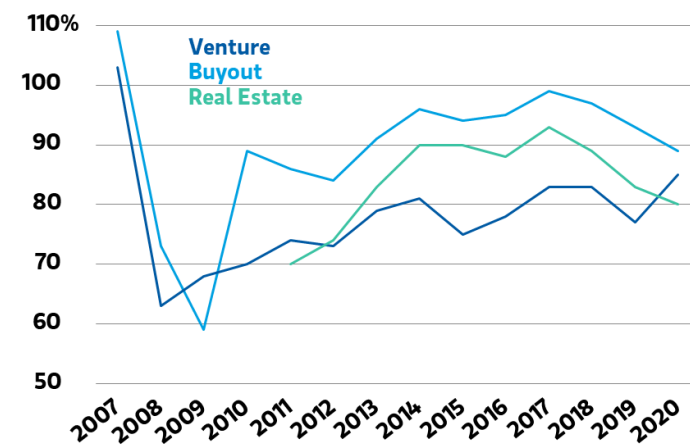
Source: Cambridge Associates, Thomson Reuters Eikon as of March 31, 2021

Investment Mechanics

To be clear, secondary investments have limited scope in driving value relative to traditional private investments. Once a selection has been made, there is rarely an opportunity for a secondary manager to affect the performance of the underlying investments. The typical secondary strategy is centered on acquiring LP interests or assets, usually at a discount to net asset value (NAV). As a result, sellers receive liquidity for their stake in the investment, and the secondary buyers usually acquire assets at a discount and with the prospect of accelerated cash flows. Essentially, the buyers agree to take on any future funding obligations in exchange for future distributions from the investment. While average market pricing does fluctuate, during most normal market environments the secondary market trades at some discount to NAV.

Secondary prices may fluctuate over various environments (see Exhibit 4). During periods when secondary buyers face pricing pressure for the best assets, returns may be slightly lower than historical averages. To enhance returns, many secondary managers employ more innovative deal structures, such as those featuring deferred payments or third-party leverage, in which case the buyer borrows capital to try to enhance returns. Deferred payments have become more common as financing tools to bridge pricing gaps between asset buyers and sellers, especially for IRR-challenged situations. Additionally, and as a consequence of larger funds and increased competition, more secondary managers are using third-party leverage to complete transactions or enhance returns. Of course, leverage is also likely to magnify losses during downturns.

Exhibit 4: Secondary Pricing Versus Net Asset Value



Source: Greenhill as of January 2021

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For those planning to invest in private markets, choices may include investing directly in funds or aggregating exposure through a fund of funds. Investing directly in funds can be challenging, as it may take large amounts of capital and several years to build a diversified program. While investing in a primary fund of funds can aid in diversification, it is limited, as the portfolio will typically contain a limited number of managers and still present a degree of vintage year risk. In contrast, a typical secondary portfolio is built on multiple transactions. The secondary investment manager can diversify by a greater extent and across a wider variety of factors—including strategy, fund, manager, geography and vintage. Depending on the market environment, a secondary portfolio would likely have exposure to a range of vintages spanning nearly a decade. Typical secondary portfolios will have exposure to both buyout and venture strategies and can also have exposure to non-US funds. This ability to purchase at a discount and diversify can be particularly attractive for investors who have not historically invested in private investments. Finally, because secondary funds have the luxury of underwriting a set of existing assets well into their lifecycle, a degree of uncertainty is removed from the underwriting equation.

Market Participants

Historically, two types of managers have been the dominant buyers of LP interests in the secondary market: stand-alone secondary fund managers and fund-of-private-funds managers. Stand-alone secondary managers raise capital to invest solely in secondary opportunities. In contrast, funds of private funds can make secondary investments either directly or through specific vehicles. Today, some of the largest secondary investment funds are actually being managed by many of the same firms that operate primary private investments. Over the past decade, investors hoping to capitalize on what is perceived to be a growing opportunity have increasingly entered into the secondary transaction market.

These new entrants encompass captive secondary funds (including those that are part of large financial institutions), niche or sector-focused secondary funds (real estate, infrastructure and venture capital) and more opportunistic players such as pension plans, endowments and family offices. Additional participants in the secondary market are intermediation platforms. While intermediation in the secondary market is still not as pervasive as in corporate banking, leading advisors to secondary market sellers include investments banks, dedicated boutique firms, electronic exchanges and established fund placement agents.

Investment Process

As we look to better understand the secondary market environment, it helps to understand its processes and categories. Transaction sizes in the secondary market can range from around \$1 million to more than \$1 billion. That said, deals in excess of \$50 million tend to be intermediated or brokered. In an intermediated process, commonly known as an auction, the intermediary elicits bids from a number of preselected buyers, and the winner generally is the highest bidder. On the other hand, deals smaller than \$50 million are often privately negotiated. While these deals are difficult to source, they may potentially offer higher returns to the secondary investor, as the discount in a privately negotiated transaction tends to be greater.

Secondary Market Categories

The secondary market is broad and growing. Almost all types of private investments can be sold on the secondary market, with certain strategies, such as buyout, venture, real estate and infrastructure, more heavily traded than distressed debt, mezzanine financing and special situations. A secondary transaction can be made either through a traditional sale or a number of structured transactions. Secondary managers engage in buying interests in seasoned funds that are typically 50% to 70% funded, three years old and well into, or possibly emerging from, their J-curves. This timing allows greater visibility of the underlying portfolio as well as earlier distributions, as the portfolio may already be generating cash. Typically, the secondary investment category can be subdivided as follows:

Secondary Direct

The sale of a captive portfolio of direct investments to a secondary buyer, with the secondary buyer either managing the investments or arranging for a new manager.

Synthetic Secondary/Spinout

Under a synthetic secondary transaction, secondary investors acquire an interest in a new limited partnership that is formed specifically to hold a portfolio of direct investments. Typically, the manager of the new fund has managed the assets as a captive portfolio.

Tail-end

This category typically refers to the sale of the remaining assets in a fund that is approaching, or has exceeded, its anticipated life. A tail-end transaction allows the manager of the fund to achieve liquidity for the fund's investors.

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Structured Secondary

This category typically refers to the structured sale of a portfolio of fund interests in which the seller keeps some or all of the fund interests on its balance sheet, but the buyer agrees to fund all future capital calls of the seller's portfolio in exchange for a preferred return secured against future distributions of the seller's portfolio.

Stapled Secondary/Primary

A stapled secondary transaction combines the purchase of an existing pool of assets together with the commitment of primary capital to the general partner's next fund.

Portfolio Restructuring

The secondary investment manager can develop and finance innovative structures that allow investors to rebalance their exposure to fund assets—including fund interests, direct investments and co-investments—through alternative mechanisms to an outright sale.

Conclusion

While many have thought of secondary portfolios as a tactical allocation during periods of market dislocations, GIMA believes these portfolios deserve consideration for a strategic allocation in investors' portfolios. Secondary investments currently represent one of the most compelling and economical ways for sophisticated investors to access private investments. As the secondary market for private investments has become an established part of the broader private investment opportunity set, secondary market investments not only provide broad diversification across various sectors and vintages, but generally return capital earlier than more traditional private investment portfolios. Along with allowing investors greater diversification, liquidity and flexibility, secondary funds have produced competitive returns relative to other private markets. As a result, we believe they deserve consideration in a client's portfolio construction process.

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- Volatility of returns;
- Restrictions on transferring interests in a fund;
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RSI1642689634562 01/2022