Demystifying Debt Yields

Jack Corgel Ph.D.
Cornell University, jc81@cornell.edu

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Demystifying Debt Yields

Abstract
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Jan A. deRoos, Executive Director
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Center for Real Estate and Finance
Cornell University
School of Hotel Administration
389 Statler Hall
Ithaca, NY 14853

Phone: 607-255-6025
Fax: 607-254-2922
www.cref.cornell.edu
Demystifying Debt Yields

by Jack Corgel

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Commercial mortgage lenders have increasingly applied a debt yield ratio standard in determining loan size and feasibility. Consequently, an understanding of this new ratio is valuable for the commercial borrowers, including the hospitality industry. The debt yield is the net operating income divided by the loan amount, and a 10- to 12-percent debt yield is typical. An analysis of this metric finds that the debt yield is related to the more common standards of debt coverage ratio and mortgage constant, in that the debt coverage ratio is the ratio of the debt yield to the mortgage constant, which is essentially a risk-related number. Although the debt yield is a loan capitalization rate, it does not conceptually relate to the interest rate or to the property capitalization rate. Thus, although the debt yield metric may be unfamiliar to the hospitality industry, it is related to the more familiar debt coverage ratio.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jack Corgel, Ph.D., holds the Robert C. Baker Chair of Real Estate and is a full professor at the School of Hotel Administration (jc81@cornell.edu). He served as the first director of the school’s Center for Hospitality Research from 1992-1994. He has been a visiting scholar at the Federal Home Loan Bank Board in Washington, D.C., and is a fellow of the Homer Hoyt Institute. He also is a senior advisor to PKF Hospitality Research where he is helping to develop new products for the hotel industry based on property-level financial performance information. He has published over 65 articles in academic and professional journals, mainly on the subjects of real estate finance, investment, valuation, and hospitality real estate, in such journals as Real Estate Economics, Journal of Urban Economics, Journal of Risk and Insurance, Journal of the American Business Law Association, Cornell Hospitality Quarterly, and International Journal of Hospitality Management. In addition, he has written for nearly every national journal read by real estate professionals. His textbook, “Real Estate Perspectives” (with Smith and Ling) was used throughout the nation for introductory real estate courses.

This article benefited from comments by Jan deRoos and Wally Boudry.
Like a thief in the night, debt yield ratios (DY) snuck into the offices of commercial mortgage lenders in the U.S. and took over loan sizing methodology. According to C-Loans.com, it is the money center banks and investment banks originating fixed-rate, conduit-style commercial loans that are using the new Debt Yield Ratio. Commercial banks, lending for their own portfolio, and most other commercial lenders have not yet adopted the Debt Yield Ratio.\(^1\)

Notwithstanding that observation, discussions with a hotel lending executive at a money-center bank indicates that the use of DY has become pervasive in the commercial mortgage lending industry.\(^2\) With loan sizing arguably the most important underwriting decision made by commercial mortgage lenders, the question pondered in this article involves the utility of a DY methodology for loan sizing relative to traditional methodologies based on loan-to-value (LTV) and debt coverage (DCR) ratios. I find the DY method has a simple, fundamental relationship to the DCR method. Although the DY ratio on its surface is not as detailed as the DCR method with respect to lending risks and does not appear to marginally enhance predictably of commercial mortgage loan delinquency and default, DY maintains fairly widespread practical appeal among commercial mortgage lenders as the likelihood of taking back properties in the current environment continues to be higher than normal.

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2. Note that this the mortgage market with which I am most familiar. Also see: Commercial Mortgage Alert, “Debt Yield Emerges as Lender Gauge,” February 20, 2009.
Debt Yield Justification
Defined as net operating income (NOI) divided by loan amount, DY levels set at approximately 10 percent are purported to provide more suitable first mortgage loan amounts than other loan sizing methods in the current low interest, default-stigmatized market. Lenders who fear that appraisals are potentially inaccurate during the current property value trough shy away from relying on LTV ratio for loan sizing, while the DCR approach is seen as too complicated and not conducive for loan sizing in the current low interest rate market. Hence, debt yield represents a “cleaner benchmark” toward “more conservative underwriting.” Part of the appeal of a 10-percent DY, for example, seems to be that lenders know they will realize a cash-on-cash return of 10 percent if forced to foreclose on day one of the loan term.

Another appealing feature to lenders involves the reduction in transaction costs by negotiating just the debt yield ratio and avoiding the negotiation of interest rate, amortization period, and DCR. The merits of debt yield have become particularly attractive to hotel lenders as articulated by Ross and by Rushmore who note that debt yields in the range of 10 to 12 percent typically are required for hotels.

I became curious about this loan-sizing innovation because details about the conceptual foundation for the 10- to 12-percent lender requirement are sketchy, and these levels exceed by several hundred basis points the prevailing market interest rates and mortgage constants for first mortgages. Because DY is essentially a capitalization rate for valuing the debt position, and hence the loan sizing application, it might possess a conceptual relationship to capital market rates. Using conventional approaches in macroeconomics (i.e., Fisher Effect) and financial economics (i.e., cost of capital methods), I could not conceptually link DY to either an interest rate or property capitalization rate. So, I moved on to the next step, which involves relating DY to LTV and DCR.

Equating DY and DCR Sizing Formulas
Debt yield is defined as the relationship between NOI and loan amount (LA),

\[\text{DY} = \frac{\text{NOI}}{\text{LA}}.\]  

Typically specified in practice as the trailing 12-month historical amount, NOI also can be expressed as forward 12-month and stabilized dollar amounts. Rearranging Equation (1) to its loan sizing form gives,

\[\text{LA} = \frac{\text{NOI}}{\text{DY}}.\]  

This form mirrors the direct capitalization model used for many types of valuations. Hence, the DY acts as the capitalization rate and the model generates an estimated value of the property debt position. The DY requirement presumably comes from lenders’ investment committees. Interpretations of the spreads between either the overall property capitalization rate and DY or the mortgage rate and DY are not immediately clear for aiding decisions on assignments of DY’s.

As shown below, the relevant spread is between DY and the mortgage constant (MC).

Equation (3) presents the traditional loan sizing formula based on DCR.

\[\text{LA} = \frac{(\text{NOI} / \text{DCR})}{\text{MC}}.\]  

In this equation, the property NOI is effectively deflated from the division by a DCR >1. Taking this result and dividing by MC allows Equation (3) to also take the form of the direct capitalization model. Deflating NOI by the DCR >1 represents an adjustment for risk. The MC also includes a property-specific risk premium embedded in the interest-rate component of this capitalization rate and the risk management feature of amortization over a specific term. The MC requirement comes from a combination of property-specific lender requirements influenced by a competitive lending market and capital market forces that drive mortgage interest rates, while the DCR requirement either comes from loan committee decisions or the securitization process (i.e., rating agencies).

The two loan sizing formulas are similar. Both use direct income capitalization to estimate the value of the property debt position and both rely on lender inputs to reflect endemic lending risks. Therefore, they likely have a fundamental relationship. To find this relationship, I set the two equations equal to one another and solve for DY.

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3 Alternatively, the income numerator may be net cash flow (after capital expenditures).
4 See: Commercial Mortgage Alert, loc. cit.
6 The Fisher effect states that the real interest rate equals the nominal interest rate minus the expected inflation rate. Therefore, real interest rates fall as inflation increases, unless nominal rates increase at the same rate as inflation. See: Irving Fisher, The Theory of Interest (Clifton, NJ: Augustus M. Kelley, 1930).
7 Attempts to link DY to LTV did not create any insights since the result always depends on value.
Assuming that the two models equate such that $LA = LA$, then

$$\frac{NOI}{DY} = \frac{(NOI/DCR)}{MC}. \quad (4)$$

Multiplying both sides by $DY$ and then by $MC$ yields

$$NOI (MC) = NOI (DY) / DCR \quad (5)$$

Finally, dividing each side by $NOI$, cancelling, and multiplying both sides by $DCR$ gives the relationship between $DY$ and $DCR$ as

$$DCR (MC) = DY. \quad (6)$$

In this form, the $DY$ is a DCR-adjusted (i.e., inflated) $MC$. The $DY$ simply aggregates the separate risk adjustment components of the DCR loan sizing formula by multiplication. The bundling of risk adjustments into a single yield has been offered as a relative advantage of using $DY$ for loan sizing.\(^9\)

Equation (6) may be rearranged as

$$DCR = \frac{DY}{MC}, \quad (7)$$

so that it portrays the DCR as the ratio of $DY$ to $MC$. When lenders hold mortgages they get a cash flow return of debt service ($DS$) based on the loan amount ($LA$),

$$MC = \frac{DS}{LA} \quad (8)$$

When lenders take back properties they get a cash flow return of $NOI$ based on $LA$,\(^10\)

$$DY = \frac{NOI}{LA} \quad (9)$$

It is confirmed in Equations (8) and (9) that these returns are related by the required DCR. For spread watchers the difference between $DY$ and $MC$ may be a useful time series metric. As always, lower DCRs, for example, indicate looser lending requirements via higher loan amounts. The same can be said for a narrowing of the spread.

### Checking Assumptions

Perhaps the assumption driving Equation (4) is incorrect or there is something special in the $DY$ approach related to the current market conditions that can only be revealed from a numerical experiment. To test this notion, I assembled the following data from a recent survey of hotel lenders:\(^11\)

$$DCR = 1.35$$

First Mortgage Interest Rate = 6.58%

Amortization Period = 23.56 yrs.

$$MC = 8.37\%$$

The MC is obtained by adding a sinking fund factor of 1.79 percent computed on a monthly amortization schedule and converted to an annual number. Running these recent survey data through Equation (6) yields the following $DY$:

$$1.35 \times 8.37\% = 11.30\%$$

The $DY$ of 11.30 percent computed with loan parameters at current market levels falls within the range identified by hotel finance experts Ross and Rushmore.\(^12\) The current $DY$ and $MC$ spread is

$$2.93\% = 11.30\% - 8.37\%$$

**Delinquency and Default Prediction using $DY$**

An extensive literature exists on the determinants of commercial mortgage delinquency and default, as reviewed by Seslen and Wheaton.\(^13\) Because $DY$ is a recent innovation, it does not appear in this review and Seslen and Wheaton do not introduce $DY$ for modeling CMBS delinquency and default; instead they rely on traditional loan parameters—LTV and DCR.\(^14\) An attempt by Koll Bond Ratings to test the predictive power of $DY$ for detecting commercial mortgage loan problems resulted in the coefficient on $DY$ not being statistically significant for explaining CMBS default rates because of the colinearity of $DY$ with DCR and $MC$ indicated above.\(^15\)

### Conclusion

The traditional DCR loan sizing formula explicitly recognizes low and high interest rates and amortization periods through the $MC$. The $MC$ also explicitly accounts for default risk premiums. Finally, the DCR model can be tailored to the specific risk of a property type and individual property loan through the DCR requirement. The $DY$ ratio aggregates these components in a debt capitalization rate. If refinancing and origination negotiations go more smoothly with a single underwriting parameter in play and lenders feel more comfortable thinking in terms of their yield for refinancing and if properties are taken back, so be it! Notwithstanding, the equivalency between $DY$ to DCR and $MC$ is quite transparent. ■

\(^9\) Commercial Mortgage Alert, *loc. cit.*

\(^10\) In the more likely event of refinancing, the measure provides a look at potential return.


\(^12\) Ross, *loc. cit.*; and Rushmore, *op. cit.*


References


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Vol. 1, No. 3 *Cornell Hotel Indices, First Quarter 2012: Have We Turned the Corner?*, by Crocker H. Liu, Adam Nowak, and Robert M. White, Jr.