As the COVID-19 pandemic affects the nation, hires and turnover reach record highs in 2020

Data from the Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey (JOLTS) highlight the effects of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and the results of efforts to mitigate its spread in 2020. With the challenges of the pandemic, many of the JOLTS data elements experienced shocks early in the year before returning to previous trends. In fact, many of the data elements experienced series highs. For example, the hires level reached a series high of 8.3 million in May 2020, bouncing back from a depressed level of 3.9 million in April 2020. The total separations level, also referred as turnover, reached a series high of 16.3 million in March 2020, boosted largely by a spike in layoffs and discharges.

The Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey (JOLTS) data show that job openings, hires, and total separations experienced large movements early in 2020 in the wake of an economic recession because of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. After the initial economic downturn, many of the JOLTS data series started to return to prepandemic levels. This article reviews the JOLTS data for 2020 at the total nonfarm, industry, and regional levels. (For definitions of JOLTS terms, see the box that follows.)

Definitions of JOLTS terms*

**Job Openings**

Job openings include all positions that are open on the last business day of the reference month. A job is open only if it meets the following three conditions: (1) A specific position exists and there is work available for that position; the position can be full time or part time, and it can be permanent, short term, or seasonal; (2) the job could start within 30 days, whether or not the employer can find a suitable candidate during that time; and (3) the employer is actively recruiting workers from outside the establishment to fill the position; active recruiting means that the establishment is taking steps to fill a position and may include advertising in
Job openings

The job openings level is a procyclical measure of labor demand; the number of job openings tends to increase during economic expansion and decrease during an economic contraction. A larger number of job openings...
generally indicates that employers need additional workers, which is a sign of a demand for labor and confidence in the economy. Job openings and employment are closely linked and tend to rise and fall together. Also notable in this context is that the number of employees on nonfarm payrolls is considered a Principal Federal Economic Indicator; more particularly, it is frequently cited as a coincident economic indicator.  

Job openings fell sharply in March 2020 by 17.1 percent. In April, job openings fell further to a level of 4.6 million on the last business day of the month. As lockdown efforts lifted throughout the country, job openings showed a slow recovery by the close of 2020, although still below levels seen in 2019. Comparing December 2019 and December 2020, job openings declined by 0.1 percent. The small decline in job openings signals a drop in the demand for labor from December 2019 to December 2020. (See table 1.) The volatility of job openings from December 2019 to December 2020 correlates with the economic recession as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite over-the-year declines in job openings, they are still at a higher level compared with historical levels.

Table 1. Change in level and percentage of job openings, by industry and region, not seasonally adjusted, December 2018–December 2020 (level in thousands)

| Industry and region                        | Level by month and year | Change, December 2018 to December 2019 | Change, December 2019 to December 2020 |
|-------------------------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Total nonfarm                              | 6,749                   | -710                                   | -7                                     |
| Industry                                  |                         |                                        |                                        |
| Total private                              | 6,124                   | -801                                   | 99                                     |
| Mining and logging                         | 23                      | -11                                    | 2                                      |
| Construction                               | 293                     | -83                                    | 1                                      |
| Manufacturing                              | 441                     | -92                                    | 95                                     |
| Durable goods                              | 297                     | -91                                    | 47                                     |
| Nondurable goods                           | 144                     | 0                                      | 47                                     |
| Trade, transportation, and utilities       | 1,269                   | -206                                   | 23                                     |
| Wholesale trade                            | 163                     | 2                                      | -6                                     |
| Retail trade                               | 801                     | -170                                   | 51                                     |
| Transportation, warehousing, and utilities | 305                     | -39                                    | -21                                    |
| Information                                | 132                     | 13                                     | -38                                    |
| Financial activities                       | 341                     | -30                                    | -8                                     |
| Finance and insurance                      | 278                     | -57                                    | -1                                     |
| Real estate and rental and leasing         | 63                      | 27                                     | -31                                    |
| Professional and business services         | 1,196                   | -125                                   | 256                                    |
| Education and health services              | 1,251                   | -87                                    | 26                                     |
| Educational services                       | 93                      | 75                                     | 8                                      |
| Healthcare and social assistance           | 1,159                   | -95                                    | 51                                     |
| Leisure and hospitality                    | 907                     | -158                                   | -180                                   |
| Arts, entertainment, and recreation        | 97                      | 17                                     | -78                                    |
| Accommodation and food services            | 810                     | -175                                   | -102                                   |

See footnotes at end of table.
Table 1. Change in level and percentage of job openings, by industry and region, not seasonally adjusted, December 2018–December 2020 (level in thousands)

| Industry and region                  | Level by month and year | Change, December 2018 to December 2019 | Change, December 2019 to December 2020 |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
|                                      | December 2018 | December 2019 | December 2020 | Level | Percent | Level | Percent |
| Other services                       | 271 | 249 | 195 | -22 | -8.1 | -54 | -21.7 |
| Government                           | 624 | 716 | 610 | 92 | 14.7 | -106 | -14.8 |
| Federal                              | 105 | 88 | 89 | -17 | -16.2 | 1 | 1.1 |
| State and local                      | 519 | 628 | 521 | 109 | 21.0 | -107 | -17.0 |
| Education                            | 220 | 216 | 196 | -4 | -1.8 | -20 | -9.3 |
| Excluding education                  | 299 | 412 | 325 | 113 | 37.8 | -87 | -21.1 |

| Region                               | Level | Percent | Level | Percent |
|--------------------------------------|-------|---------|-------|---------|
| Northeast                            | 1,123 | -62 | -32 | -3.0 |
| South                                | 2,544 | -281 | 131 | 5.8 |
| Midwest                              | 1,598 | -345 | 41 | 3.3 |
| West                                 | 1,484 | -23 | -146 | -10.0 |

Note: Details may not sum to totals because of rounding.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Job openings by industry
During 2020, the monthly job openings level for 5 of the 19 industries reached series highs. The top industries highlight the employer industries during the COVID-19 pandemic that could seamlessly shift employees to work remotely or employer industries that are considered essential services that needed to remain open. The top three industries with the most job openings were professional and business services, at 1.5 million in December 2020; healthcare and social assistance, at 1.3 million in October 2020; and state and local government education, at 270,000 in January 2020. (See table 2.)

Table 2. Monthly series highs, by industry and region, seasonally adjusted, 2020

| Industry and region                  | Industry and region data element | Month | Level |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------|-------|
| Nondurable goods                     | Job openings                      | November | 263,000 |
| Professional and business services   | Job openings                      | December | 1.5 million |
| Healthcare and social assistance     | Job openings                      | October | 1.3 million |
| Arts, entertainment, and recreation  | Job openings                      | January | 158,000 |
| State and local government education | Job openings                      | January | 270,000 |
| Construction                         | Hires                             | May | 724,000 |
| Durable goods                        | Hires                             | May | 370,000 |
| Nondurable goods                     | Hires                             | May | 269,000 |
| Wholesale trade                      | Hires                             | May | 228,000 |

See footnotes at end of table.
| Industry and region                        | Industry and region data element | Month     | Level    |
|------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------|----------|
| Retail trade                             | Hires                            | May       | 1.0 million |
| Transportation, warehousing, and utilities| Hires                            | November  | 421,000  |
| Real estate and rental and leasing       | Hires                            | July      | 131,000  |
| Professional and business services       | Hires                            | August    | 1.4 million |
| Healthcare and social assistance         | Hires                            | May       | 1.1 million |
| Accommodation and food services          | Hires                            | June      | 1.9 million |
| Other services                           | Hires                            | May       | 646,000  |
| Mining and logging                       | Total separations                | April     | 68,000   |
| Construction                             | Total separations                | April     | 820,000  |
| Durable goods                            | Total separations                | April     | 542,000  |
| Nondurable goods                         | Total separations                | March     | 358,000  |
| Wholesale trade                          | Total separations                | March     | 335,000  |
| Retail trade                             | Total separations                | March     | 1.8 million |
| Transportation, warehousing, and utilities| Total separations                | March     | 602,000  |
| Information                              | Total separations                | March     | 246,000  |
| Real estate and rental and leasing       | Total separations                | March     | 203,000  |
| Professional and business services       | Total separations                | March     | 1.9 million |
| Educational services                     | Total separations                | March     | 371,000  |
| Healthcare and social assistance         | Total separations                | March     | 1.7 million |
| Arts, entertainment, and recreation      | Total separations                | March     | 665,000  |
| Accommodation and food services          | Total separations                | March     | 5.0 million |
| Other services                           | Total separations                | March     | 965,000  |
| State and local government education     | Total separations                | March     | 294,000  |
| State and local government, excluding education | Total separations                | April     | 248,000  |
| Retail trade                             | Quits                            | January   | 594,000  |
| Transportation, warehousing, and utilities| Quits                            | December  | 170,000  |
| Healthcare and social assistance         | Quits                            | October   | 467,000  |
| State and local government education     | Quits                            | July      | 147,000  |
| Mining and logging                       | Layoffs and discharges           | April     | 61,000   |
| Construction                             | Layoffs and discharges           | April     | 713,000  |
| Durable goods                            | Layoffs and discharges           | April     | 483,000  |
| Nondurable goods                         | Layoffs and discharges           | March     | 277,000  |
| Wholesale trade                          | Layoffs and discharges           | April     | 257,000  |
| Retail trade                             | Layoffs and discharges           | March     | 1.4 million |
| Transportation, warehousing, and utilities| Layoffs and discharges           | March     | 443,000  |
| Information                              | Layoffs and discharges           | March     | 196,000  |
| Real estate and rental and leasing       | Layoffs and discharges           | April     | 176,000  |
| Professional and business services       | Layoffs and discharges           | March     | 1.3 million |
| Educational services                     | Layoffs and discharges           | March     | 320,000  |
| Healthcare and social assistance         | Layoffs and discharges           | March     | 1.2 million |
| Arts, entertainment, and recreation      | Layoffs and discharges           | March     | 618,000  |
| Accommodation and food services          | Layoffs and discharges           | March     | 4.6 million |
| Other services                           | Layoffs and discharges           | March     | 895,000  |
| State and local government education     | Layoffs and discharges           | March     | 137,000  |
| State and local government, excluding education | Layoffs and discharges           | April     | 151,000  |
| Professional and business services       | Other separations                | April     | 114,000  |
| State and local government education     | Other separations                | July      | 52,000   |

See footnotes at end of table.
Monthly job openings increased over the year from December 2019 to December 2020 in 8 of the 19 industry groups for which data are published. The largest over-the-year increases in job openings occurred in nondurable goods manufacturing (+32.6 percent); professional and business services (+23.9 percent); and durable goods manufacturing (+22.8 percent). Eleven of the nineteen industries showed job opening declines from December 2019 to December 2020. Industries with the largest declines were arts, entertainment, and recreation (−68.4 percent); real estate and rental and leasing (−34.4 percent); and information (−26.2 percent). (See table 1.)

### Job openings by region

The West region was the only region to experience a monthly series high in job openings, with a level of 1.7 million in January 2020. (See table 2.) Two of the four census regions experienced increases in the number of job openings from December 2019 to December 2020. The South region had an increase of 5.8 percent and the Midwest region increased by 3.3 percent. The West region had the largest over-the-year decline in job openings at 10.0 percent. The Northeast region also experienced a decline of 3.0 percent. (See table 1.)

### Job openings and unemployment

One way to analyze job openings and unemployment is to consider the number of unemployed people per job opening. The number of unemployed people per job opening is the ratio of unemployed people, as published by the Current Population Survey, to the number of job openings. To calculate this ratio, we divide the number of unemployed people by the number of job openings. Unemployment and job openings levels generally share an inverse relationship. That is, when the economy enters a period of expansion, the number of unemployed people tends to fall or remain at a low level. During economic expansions, job openings tend to increase or remain high, causing the unemployed people per job opening ratio to decrease. The opposite occurs when the economy enters periods of economic contraction—unemployment increases and job openings decrease, leading to a higher unemployed people per job openings ratio that helps describe the slack in the labor market.6
In January and February of 2020, the unemployed people per job openings ratio was 0.8—indicating there were more openings than unemployed jobseekers. This had made 27 consecutive months that the ratio was at or below 1.0—dating back to December 2017. The current recession that began in February 2020 helped end the streak. The unemployed per job openings ratio then increased to 1.2 in March 2020 and peaked in April 2020 at 5.0. In the latter part of the year, the ratio began to decline steadily to 1.6 in October 2020, were it remained through December 2020. From the pre-COVID months to December, there was less demand by employers for job openings than supply of unemployed jobseekers. (See chart 1.) The Great Recession began in December 2007, with an unemployed people per job opening ratio of 1.7. The ratio peaked at 6.5 in July 2009, 1 month after the recession officially ended—an increase of 282 percent. Though this current recession did not reach the same ratio high as during the Great Recession, the sudden rise represented a much larger (525) percentage change in the ratio.

Hires

Hires, like job openings, are considered a procyclical measurement. Hires showed a similar trend to job openings in 2020, with sharp declines in March and April 2020. The declines were offset by large gains in May, with hires reaching a series high that month and later hires declining to pre-COVID levels. Specifically, hires declined in March by 847,000 and continued to plunge in April by 1.2 million as the country reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic and took steps to contain it. In May 2020, hiring rebounded (+4.3 million) reaching 8.3 million. The total...
number of annual hires increased to a level of 73.1 million in 2020 (+4.4 percent), making it the 11th consecutive year that the annual hires level has increased. (See table 3.)

Table 3. Change in level and percentage of annual hires, by industry and region, not seasonally adjusted, December 2018–December 2020 (levels in thousand)

| Industry and region                          | 2018  | 2019  | 2020  | Change, December 2018 to December 2019 | Change, December 2019 to December 2020 |
|----------------------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Level by year                                | Level | Percent | Level | Percent | Level | Percent |
| Total                                        | 68,596| 69,984| 73,094| 1,388 | 2.0 | 3,110 | 4.4 |
| Industry                                    |       |        |       |        |      |       |     |
| Total private                                | 64,284| 65,564| 68,899| 1,280 | 2.0 | 3,335 | 5.1 |
| Mining and logging                           | 447   | 303   | 246   | -144  | -32.2 | -57  | -18.8 |
| Construction                                 | 4,526 | 4,987 | 5,022 | 461   | 10.2 | 35   | 0.7  |
| Manufacturing                                | 4,391 | 4,053 | 4,819 | -338  | -7.7 | 766  | 18.9 |
| Durable goods                                | 2,511 | 2,272 | 2,746 | -239  | -9.5 | 474  | 20.9 |
| Nondurable goods                             | 1,879 | 1,781 | 2,073 | -98   | -5.2 | 292  | 16.4 |
| Trade, transportation, and utilities         | 13,673| 13,902| 15,306| 229   | 1.7 | 1,404 | 10.1 |
| Wholesale trade                              | 1,755 | 1,775 | 1,843 | 20    | 1.1 | 68   | 3.8  |
| Retail trade                                 | 9,026 | 9,032 | 9,836 | 6     | 0.1 | 804  | 8.9  |
| Transportation, warehousing, and utilities   | 2,894 | 3,095 | 3,629 | 201   | 6.9 | 534  | 17.3 |
| Information                                  | 1,089 | 1,133 | 977   | 44    | 4.0 | -156 | -13.8 |
| Financial activities                         | 2,500 | 2,656 | 2,704 | 156   | 6.2 | 48   | 1.8  |
| Finance and insurance                        | 1,636 | 1,682 | 1,690 | 46    | 2.8 | 8    | 0.5  |
| Real estate and rental and leasing           | 864   | 973   | 1,013 | 109   | 12.6 | 40   | 4.1  |
| Professional and business services           | 13,749| 13,790| 13,362| 41    | 0.3 | -428 | -3.1 |
| Education and health services                | 8,516 | 8,665 | 9,288 | 149   | 1.7 | 623  | 7.2  |
| Educational services                         | 1,160 | 1,166 | 1,081 | 6     | 0.5 | -85  | -7.3 |
| Healthcare and social assistance             | 7,352 | 7,499 | 8,207 | 147   | 2.0 | 708  | 9.4  |
| Leisure and hospitality                     | 12,798| 13,464| 13,952| 666   | 5.2 | 488  | 3.6  |
| Arts, entertainment, and recreation          | 2,208 | 1,992 | 1,646 | -216  | -9.8 | -346 | -17.4 |
| Accommodation and food services              | 10,587| 11,470| 12,308| 883   | 8.3 | 838  | 7.3  |
| Other services                               | 2,596 | 2,609 | 3,223 | 13    | 0.5 | 614  | 23.5 |
| Government                                  | 4,311 | 4,420 | 4,193 | 109   | 2.5 | -227 | -5.1 |
| Federal                                     | 419   | 501   | 907   | 82    | 19.6 | 406  | 81.0 |
| State and local                              | 3,891 | 3,918 | 3,286 | 27    | 0.7 | -632 | -16.1 |
| Education                                   | 2,013 | 2,037 | 1,647 | 24    | 1.2 | -390 | -19.1 |
| Excluding education                          | 1,879 | 1,882 | 1,641 | 3     | 0.2 | -241 | -12.8 |
| Region                                       |       |       |       |       |      |       |     |
| Northeast                                   | 10,496| 10,864| 12,037| 368   | 3.5 | 1,173 | 10.8 |
| South                                       | 27,315| 28,278| 27,803| 963   | 3.5 | -475 | -1.7 |
| Midwest                                     | 15,193| 14,895| 15,904| -298  | -2.0 | 1,009 | 6.8  |
| West                                        | 15,590| 15,946| 17,350| 356   | 2.3 | 1,404 | 8.8  |

Note: Details may not sum to totals because of rounding.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.
Hires by industry

Annual hires increased in 12 of 19 industries in 2020 and decreased in 7 industries. The largest percentage increases in the annual hires levels were in federal government (+81.0 percent). The increase was primarily driven by the 2020 Decennial Census and the need to hire additional canvas employees at the U.S. Census Bureau. Other services (+23.5 percent), and durable goods manufacturing (+20.9 percent) also increased. The largest percentage decreases in hires occurred in state and local government education (−19.1 percent); mining and logging (−18.8 percent); and arts, entertainment, and recreation (−17.4 percent). (See table 3.) As the employers around the United States opened up from the COVID-19 restrictions, four industries experienced annual series highs for the level of hires in 2020. The four industries were accommodation and food services (12.3 million); healthcare and social assistance (8.2 million); transportation, warehousing, and utilities (3.6 million); and other services (3.2 million). (See table 4.) To note, these four industries also reached annual series highs for total separations, which was attributed to COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 4. Annual series highs by industry and region, not seasonally adjusted, 2020, (levels in thousand)

| Industry and region                          | Industry and region data element | Level  |
|---------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------|
| Transportation, warehousing and Utilities   | Hires                            | 3,629  |
| Healthcare and social assistance            | Hires                            | 8,207  |
| Accommodation and food services             | Hires                            | 12,308 |
| Other Services                              | Hires                            | 3,223  |
| Healthcare and social assistance            | Quits                            | 4,892  |
| State and local government education        | Quits                            | 1,270  |
| Wholesale trade                             | Layoffs and discharges           | 1,019  |
| Retail trade                                | Layoffs and discharges           | 4,410  |
| Transportation, warehousing, and utilities  | Layoffs and discharges           | 1,767  |
| Information                                 | Layoffs and discharges           | 663    |
| Real estate and rental and leasing          | Layoffs and discharges           | 617    |
| Professional and business services          | Layoffs and discharges           | 6,458  |
| Educational services                        | Layoffs and discharges           | 914    |
| Healthcare and social assistance            | Layoffs and discharges           | 3,573  |
| Arts, entertainment, and recreation         | Layoffs and discharges           | 1,724  |
| Accommodation and food services             | Layoffs and discharges           | 8,818  |
| Other services                              | Layoffs and discharges           | 2,450  |
| State and local government education        | Layoffs and discharges           | 851    |
| Transportation, warehousing, and utilities  | Other separations                | 226    |
| State and local government education        | Other separations                | 438    |
| Wholesale trade                             | Total separations                | 2,109  |
| Retail trade                                | Total separations                | 10,356 |
| Transportation, warehousing, and utilities  | Total separations                | 3,626  |
| Real estate and rental and leasing          | Total separations                | 1,098  |
| Professional and business services          | Total separations                | 14,016 |
| Education and health services               | Total separations                | 1,466  |
| Educational services                        | Total separations                | 8,939  |
| Arts, entertainment, and recreation         | Total separations                | 2,305  |
| Accommodation and food services             | Total separations                | 15,087 |
| Other services                              | Total separations                | 3,637  |

See footnotes at end of table.
Table 4. Annual series highs by industry and region, not seasonally adjusted, 2020, (levels in thousand)

| Industry and region                        | Industry and region data element | Level |
|--------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------|
| State and local government education       | Total separations                | 2,556 |
| State and local government, excluding education | Total separations                | 1,909 |
| **Region**                                |                                  |       |
| Northeast                                 | Hires                            | 12,037|
| Midwest                                   | Hires                            | 15,904|
| West                                      | Hires                            | 17,350|
| Northeast                                 | Layoffs and discharges            | 8,244 |
| South                                     | Layoffs and discharges            | 13,329|
| Midwest                                   | Layoffs and discharges            | 9,136 |
| West                                      | Layoffs and discharges            | 10,309|
| Northeast                                 | Total separations                 | 13,914|
| South                                     | Total separations                 | 30,119|
| Midwest                                   | Total separations                 | 18,095|
| West                                      | Total separations                 | 19,370|

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

In 2020, 11 industries experienced seasonally adjusted monthly series highs. Of the 11 industries, 7 industries saw series highs in May 2020. The industries reaching the highest level were healthcare and social assistance (1.1 million), retail trade (1.0 million), and construction (724,000). Three industries saw series highs throughout the summer months. Those industries were accommodation and foods services in June 2020 (1.9 million), real estate and rental and leasing in July 2020 (131,000), and professional and business services in August 2020 (1.4 million). Transportation, warehousing, and utilities experienced a series hires high in November 2020 (421,000). (See table 2.)

Six industries experienced monthly series lows in hires—all in April 2020. These industries include accommodation and food services (395,000), construction (201,000), state and local government, excluding education (79,000), real estate and rental and leasing (41,000), information (37,000), and arts, entertainment, and recreation (31,000). (See table 5.) Out of the six industries, only construction experienced a monthly series high in hires 1 month later in May 2020.

Table 5. Monthly series lows by industry and region, seasonally adjusted, 2020

| Industry and region                        | Industry and region data element | Month | Level |
|--------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------|-------|
| Construction                               | Hires                            | April | 201,000|
| Information                                | Hires                            | April | 37,000 |
| Real estate and rental and leasing         | Hires                            | April | 41,000 |
| Arts, entertainment, and recreation        | Hires                            | April | 31,000 |
| Accommodation and food services            | Hires                            | April | 395,000|
| State and local government, excluding education | Hires                            | April | 79,000 |
| Arts, entertainment, and recreation        | Total separations                | August| 44,000 |
| Other services                             | Total separations                | August| 86,000 |
| Arts, entertainment, and recreation        | Quits                            | August| 11,000 |

See footnotes at end of table.
The Northeast region had the highest percentage increase in annual hires in 2020, rising 10.8 percent. Annual hires also increased in the West region (+8.8 percent) and Midwest region (+6.8 percent). The South region was the only region to experience a decline in annual hires in 2020 (−1.7 percent). In 2019, both the Northeast and the South regions increased by 3.5 percent in annual hires, followed by the West region at 2.3 percent. In 2019, the Midwest region was the only region to experience a decline of 2.0 percent in annual hires. (See table 3.) In 2020, all four regions experienced series high in monthly hires. Of the four regions, the South (2.9 million), West (2.2 million) and Midwest (1.9 million) experienced their series high in monthly hires in May 2020. The Northeast region followed in June 2020 with a series high in monthly hires at 1.4 million. (See table 2.)

**Hires by region**

The Northeast region had the highest percentage increase in annual hires in 2020, rising 10.8 percent. Annual hires also increased in the West region (+8.8 percent) and Midwest region (+6.8 percent). The South region was the only region to experience a decline in annual hires in 2020 (−1.7 percent). In 2019, both the Northeast and the South regions increased by 3.5 percent in annual hires, followed by the West region at 2.3 percent. In 2019, the Midwest region was the only region to experience a decline of 2.0 percent in annual hires. (See table 3.) In 2020, all four regions experienced series high in monthly hires. Of the four regions, the South (2.9 million), West (2.2 million) and Midwest (1.9 million) experienced their series high in monthly hires in May 2020. The Northeast region followed in June 2020 with a series high in monthly hires at 1.4 million. (See table 2.)

**Hires and job openings**

Leading up to the COVID-19 recession, the trend occurring was that job openings were outpacing hires; which signaled an increase demand for labor. In January 2020, job openings were at a level of 7.2 million. The decline in job openings in March 2020 was likely related to the fact that job openings are a stock measure, meant to capture job openings activity on the last business day of the month. Mid-March is also when many of the COVID-19 lockdown orders began. JOLTS hires and the Current Employment Statistics employment figures experienced declines in March; however, the larger decline in those measures was not experienced until April 2020. Job openings experienced their largest decline in April 2020, with a 1.2 million decrease. The declines were offset by immediate gains in both job openings and hires, with hires reaching a series high of 8.3 million in May 2020. The large spike and series high caused hires to briefly outpace job openings in May and June 2020. Hires have since declined and returned to the levels seen around the fall and winter of 2016. Job openings have returned to levels close to that of January 2020, with a difference of a little over 400,000 job openings. (See chart 2.)
Total separations

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic affected both employees and employers as measured by JOLTS total separations data. The year began flat in January and February 2020, with 5.7 million total separations before the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic shutdowns took place in March 2020. In March 2020, total separations soared to an all-time series high at 16.3 million; however, over the next 2 months, total separations quickly reset back to pre-COVID-19 levels. JOLTS annual data show that the annual number of total separations reached its highest level in series history. It increased 20 percent from December 2019 to December 2020, rising from 68.0 million to 81.5 million. (See table 7.) The level of total separations has grown annually for 10 consecutive years, with the most recent year increase largely due to the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 6. Change in level and percentage of annual total separations, by industry and region, not seasonally adjusted, December 2018–December 2020 (levels in thousand)

| Industry and region | Level by year | Change, December 2018 to December 2019 | Change, December 2019 to December 2020 |
|---------------------|---------------|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
|                     | 2018          | 2019                                   | 2020                                    |
| Level               | Level         | Percent                                | Level                                  |
| Percent             | Level         | Percent                                | Percent                                |

See footnotes at end of table.
Table 6. Change in level and percentage of annual total separations, by industry and region, not seasonally adjusted, December 2018–December 2020 (levels in thousand)

| Industry and region                        | Level by year | Change, December 2018 to December 2019 | Change, December 2019 to December 2020 |
|--------------------------------------------|---------------|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
|                                            | 2018  | 2019  | 2020  | Level | Percent | Level | Percent |
| Total                                      | 66,201 | 67,993 | 81,493 | 1,792 | 2.7     | 13,500 | 19.9    |
| Industry                                   |       |       |       |       |         |       |         |
| Total private                              | 62,062 | 63,785 | 76,187 | 1,723 | 2.8     | 12,402 | 19.4    |
| Mining and logging                         | 394   | 353   | 336   | -41   | -10.4   | -17    | -4.8    |
| Construction                               | 4,216 | 4,867 | 4,985 | 651   | 15.4    | 118    | 2.4     |
| Manufacturing                              | 4,124 | 4,048 | 5,391 | -76   | -1.8    | 1,343  | 33.2    |
| Durable goods                              | 2,291 | 2,300 | 3,166 | 9     | 0.4     | 866    | 37.7    |
| Nondurable goods                           | 1,832 | 1,747 | 2,223 | -85   | -4.6    | 476    | 27.2    |
| Trade, transportation, and utilities       | 13,508 | 13,707 | 16,093 | 199  | 1.5     | 2,386  | 17.4    |
| Wholesale trade                            | 1,715 | 1,746 | 2,109 | 31    | 1.8     | 363    | 20.8    |
| Retail trade                               | 9,159 | 9,119 | 10,356 | -40  | -0.4    | 1,237  | 13.6    |
| Transportation, warehousing, and utilities | 2,635 | 2,843 | 3,626 | 208   | 7.9     | 783    | 27.5    |
| Information                                | 1,057 | 1,103 | 1,207 | 46    | 4.4     | 104    | 9.4     |
| Financial activities                        | 2,336 | 2,491 | 2,728 | 155   | 6.6     | 237    | 9.5     |
| Finance and insurance                      | 1,532 | 1,584 | 1,630 | 52    | 3.4     | 46     | 2.9     |
| Real estate and rental and leasing         | 803   | 906   | 1,098 | 103   | 12.8    | 192    | 21.2    |
| Professional and business services         | 13,293 | 13,509 | 14,016 | 216  | 1.6     | 507    | 3.8     |
| Education and health services              | 8,030 | 8,062 | 10,406 | 32   | 0.4     | 2,344  | 29.1    |
| Educational services                       | 1,126 | 1,115 | 1,466 | -11   | -1.0    | 351    | 31.5    |
| Healthcare and social assistance           | 6,904 | 6,947 | 8,939 | 43    | 0.6     | 1,992  | 28.7    |
| Leisure and hospitality                    | 12,542 | 13,105 | 17,389 | 563  | 4.5     | 4,284  | 32.7    |
| Arts, entertainment, and recreation        | 2,108 | 1,937 | 2,305 | -171  | -8.1    | 368    | 19.0    |
| Accommodation and food services            | 10,434 | 11,170 | 15,087 | 736  | 7.1     | 3,917  | 35.1    |
| Other services                             | 2,565 | 2,541 | 3,637 | -24   | -0.9    | 1,096  | 43.1    |
| Government                                 | 4,135 | 4,206 | 5,306 | 71    | 1.7     | 1,100  | 26.2    |
| Federal                                   | 401   | 468   | 844   | 67    | 16.7    | 376    | 80.3    |
| State and local                            | 3,735 | 3,736 | 4,463 | 1     | 0.0     | 727    | 19.5    |
| Education                                 | 1,928 | 1,924 | 2,556 | -4    | -0.2    | 632    | 32.8    |
| Excluding education                        | 1,807 | 1,813 | 1,909 | 6     | 0.3     | 96     | 5.3     |
| Region                                     |       |       |       |       |         |       |         |
| Northeast                                  | 10,087 | 10,389 | 13,914 | 302  | 3.0     | 3,525  | 33.9    |
| South                                     | 26,298 | 27,007 | 30,119 | 709  | 2.7     | 3,112  | 11.5    |
| Midwest                                   | 14,622 | 14,396 | 18,095 | -226 | -1.5    | 3,699  | 25.7    |
| West                                      | 15,194 | 16,197 | 19,370 | 1,003 | 6.6     | 3,173  | 19.6    |

Note: Details may not sum to totals because of rounding.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Total separations include quits, layoffs and discharges, and other separations. Each of these data elements has its own unique trend and cyclical movements that were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Quits are procyclical, which means that the number of quits typically rises when the economy expands and declines when the economy contracts. In normal economic conditions, a higher level of quits generally indicates workers are willing to leave
their current employment and are confident in future job prospects. However, during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, there were additional factors employee considered such as widespread employee layoffs and business closings, health reasons, and dependent care. This is clear in 2020 with the COVID-19 pandemic negatively influencing the U.S. economy as employees were less willing to leave their current job for a new one. Quits began the year relatively flat, averaging 3.5 million quits in January and February 2020 before declining over the next 2 months to the lowest 2020 level of 2.1 million in April. Over the remaining portion of the year, the quits level gradually increased and by reached pre-COVID levels by December 2020. The annual quits level fell from 42.1 million in 2019 to 36.3 million in 2020 (−13.8 percent). Layoffs and discharges are countercyclical, which means that the number typically rises during economic contractions and falls during economic expansions. In 2020, JOLTS layoffs and discharges data reveal that, at the start of the year, the levels were flat over the first 2 months. Then as the economic recession progressed because of the COVID-19 pandemic, layoffs and discharges spiked to a series high in March 2020. Throughout the spring, the number of layoffs and discharges declined to pre-COVID-19 levels and remained relatively constant for the rest of the year. Annual layoffs and discharges grew to a series high in 2020 because of the economic recession caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, monthly other separations remained relatively constant throughout the year; however, when combined for the year, other separations were higher by 4.1 percent.

Chart 3 shows the relationship of the three components to total separations by displaying the percentage of total separations attributed to each type of separation. Quits as a percentage of total separations decreased to 44.6 percent in 2020, the lowest share since 2010. Layoffs and discharges as a percentage of total separations increased to 50.3 percent in 2020, the largest share since 2009. Other separations as a percentage of total separations decreased to 5.1 percent in 2020, the lowest percentage in series history. (See chart 3.)
The number of annual quits declined over the year, from 42.1 million to 36.3 million (−13.8 percent). (See table 7.) The annual quits level decline in 2020 comes after 10 consecutive years of increases in quits. Annual layoffs and discharges increased notably over the year, from 21.9 million in 2019 to 41.0 million in 2020, an increase of 87.7 percent. (See table 8.) The annual level of other separations increased, from 4.0 million in 2019 to 4.2 million in 2020, an increase of 4.1 percent. (See table 9.)

Table 7. Change in level and percentage of annual quits, by industry and region, not seasonally adjusted, December 2018–December 2020 (levels in thousand)

| Industry and region       | Level | Change, December 2018 to December 2019 | Change, December 2019 to December 2020 |
|---------------------------|-------|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
|                           | 2018  | 2019        | 2020        | Level | Percent | Level | Percent |
| Total                     | 40,329| 42,142      | 36,318      | 1,813  | 4.5     | -5,824| -13.8   |
| Industry                  |       |             |             |       |         |       |         |
| Total private             | 38,173| 39,916      | 33,883      | 1,743  | 4.6     | -6,033| -15.1   |
| Mining and logging        | 245   | 179         | 108         | -66    | -26.9   | -71   | -39.7   |
| Construction              | 2,059 | 2,084       | 1,614       | 25     | 1.2     | -470  | -22.6   |
| Manufacturing             | 2,504 | 2,490       | 2,356       | -14    | -0.6    | -134  | -5.4    |
| Durable goods             | 1,378 | 1,396       | 1,274       | 18     | 1.3     | -122  | -8.7    |

See footnotes at end of table.
Table 7. Change in level and percentage of annual quits, by industry and region, not seasonally adjusted, December 2018–December 2020 (levels in thousand)

| Industry and region                          | 2018 Level | 2019 Level | 2020 Level | Change, December 2018 to December 2019 | Change, December 2019 to December 2020 |
|---------------------------------------------|------------|------------|------------|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Nondurable goods                            | 1,127      | 1,094      | 1,082      | -33                                    | -12                                    |
| Trade, transportation, and utilities        | 8,500      | 8,907      | 8,259      | 407                                    | -648                                   |
| Wholesale trade                             | 1,069      | 1,029      | 1,008      | -40                                    | -21                                    |
| Retail trade                                | 5,959      | 6,234      | 5,613      | 275                                    | -621                                   |
| Transportation, warehousing, and utilities  | 1,474      | 1,645      | 1,637      | 171                                    | -8                                     |
| Information                                 | 566        | 554        | 480        | -12                                    | -74                                    |
| Financial activities                        | 1,406      | 1,547      | 1,307      | 141                                    | -240                                   |
| Finance and insurance                       | 856        | 1,005      | 896        | 149                                    | -109                                   |
| Real estate and rental and leasing          | 550        | 545        | 414        | -5                                     | -131                                   |
| Professional and business services          | 7,561      | 7,767      | 6,740      | 206                                    | -1,027                                 |
| Education and health services               | 5,374      | 5,532      | 5,386      | 158                                    | -146                                   |
| Educational services                        | 582        | 648        | 492        | 66                                     | -156                                   |
| Healthcare and social assistance            | 4,795      | 4,885      | 4,892      | 90                                     | 7                                      |
| Leisure and hospitality                     | 8,441      | 9,220      | 6,544      | 779                                    | -2,676                                 |
| Arts, entertainment, and recreation         | 918        | 936        | 553        | 18                                     | -383                                   |
| Accommodation and food services             | 7,523      | 8,286      | 5,993      | 763                                    | -2,293                                 |
| Other services                              | 1,514      | 1,634      | 1,087      | 120                                    | -547                                   |
| Government                                  | 2,159      | 2,226      | 2,434      | 67                                     | 208                                    |
| Federal                                     | 183        | 208        | 246        | 25                                     | 38                                     |
| State and local                             | 1,974      | 2,016      | 2,190      | 42                                     | 174                                    |
| Education                                   | 1,044      | 1,091      | 1,270      | 47                                     | 179                                    |
| Excluding education                         | 933        | 927        | 921        | -6                                     | -6                                     |
| Region                                      |            |            |            |                                        |                                        |
| Northeast                                   | 5,386      | 5,700      | 4,992      | 314                                    | -708                                   |
| South                                       | 16,466     | 17,255     | 15,249     | 789                                    | -2,006                                 |
| Midwest                                     | 8,989      | 9,187      | 8,097      | 198                                    | -1,090                                 |
| West                                        | 9,488      | 10,000     | 7,981      | 512                                    | -2,019                                 |

Note: Details may not sum to totals because of rounding.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Table 8. Change in level and percentage of annual layoffs and discharges by industry and region, not seasonally adjusted, December 2018–December 2020 (levels in thousand)

| Industry and region                          | Level | Change, December 2018 to December 2019 | Change, December 2019 to December 2020 |
|---------------------------------------------|-------|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
|                                             | 2018  | 2019        | 2020        | Level | Percent | Level | Percent |
| Total                                       | 21,804| 21,851       | 41,018       | 47    | 0.2      | 19,167| 87.7    |

See footnotes at end of table.
### Table 8. Change in level and percentage of annual layoffs and discharges by industry and region, not seasonally adjusted, December 2018–December 2020 (levels in thousand)

| Industry and region                                      | Level  | Change, December 2018 to December 2019 | Change, December 2019 to December 2020 |
|----------------------------------------------------------|--------|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
|                                                          | 2018   | 2019                                   | 2020                                   |
|                                                          | Level  | Percent                                | Level                                  | Percent                                |
| Industry                                                 |        |                                       |                                        |                                        |
| Total private                                            | 20,550 | 20,607                                 | 39,081                                 | 57                                     | 0.3                                  | 18,474                                 | 89.6                                    |
| Mining and logging                                       | 128    | 151                                    | 206                                    | 23                                     | 18.0                                 | 55                                     | 36.4                                    |
| Construction                                             | 2,002  | 2,583                                  | 3,216                                  | 581                                    | 29.0                                 | 633                                    | 24.5                                    |
| Manufacturing                                             | 1,370  | 1,315                                  | 2,752                                  | -55                                    | -4.0                                 | 1,437                                  | 109.3                                   |
| Durable goods                                            | 752    | 750                                    | 1,727                                  | -2                                     | -0.3                                 | 977                                    | 130.3                                   |
| Nondurable goods                                         | 619    | 566                                    | 1,025                                  | -53                                    | -8.6                                 | 459                                    | 81.1                                    |
| Trade, transportation, and utilities                     | 4,174  | 4,055                                  | 7,198                                  | -119                                   | -2.9                                 | 3,143                                  | 77.5                                    |
| Wholesale trade                                          | 500    | 614                                    | 1,019                                  | 114                                    | 22.8                                 | 405                                    | 66.0                                    |
| Retail trade                                             | 2,658  | 2,420                                  | 4,410                                  | -238                                   | -9.0                                 | 1,990                                  | 82.2                                    |
| Transportation, warehousing, and utilities               | 1,013  | 1,021                                  | 1,767                                  | 8                                      | 0.8                                  | 746                                    | 73.1                                    |
| Information                                              | 412    | 463                                    | 663                                    | 51                                     | 12.4                                 | 200                                    | 43.2                                    |
| Financial activities                                     | 637    | 639                                    | 1,107                                  | 2                                      | 0.3                                  | 468                                    | 73.2                                    |
| Finance and insurance                                    | 417    | 320                                    | 489                                    | -97                                    | -23.3                                | 169                                    | 52.8                                    |
| Real estate and rental and leasing                       | 219    | 320                                    | 617                                    | 101                                    | 46.1                                 | 297                                    | 92.8                                    |
| Professional and business services                       | 4,991  | 5,041                                  | 6,458                                  | 50                                     | 1.0                                  | 1,417                                  | 28.1                                    |
| Education and health services                            | 2,102  | 2,037                                  | 4,486                                  | -65                                    | -3.1                                 | 2,449                                  | 120.2                                   |
| Educational services                                     | 479    | 402                                    | 914                                    | -77                                    | -16.1                                | 512                                    | 127.4                                   |
| Healthcare and social assistance                         | 1,626  | 1,633                                  | 3,573                                  | 7                                      | 0.4                                  | 1,940                                  | 118.8                                   |
| Leisure and hospitality                                  | 3,800  | 3,551                                  | 10,541                                 | -249                                   | -6.6                                 | 6,990                                  | 196.8                                   |
| Arts, entertainment, and recreation                      | 1,147  | 967                                    | 1,724                                  | -180                                   | -15.7                                | 757                                    | 78.3                                    |
| Accommodation and food services                          | 2,654  | 2,586                                  | 8,818                                  | -68                                    | -2.6                                 | 6,232                                  | 241.0                                   |
| Other services                                           | 942    | 769                                    | 2,450                                  | -173                                   | -18.4                                | 1,681                                  | 218.6                                   |
| Government                                               | 1,253  | 1,244                                  | 1,937                                  | -9                                     | -0.7                                 | 693                                    | 55.7                                    |
| Federal                                                  | 90     | 123                                    | 443                                    | 33                                     | 36.7                                 | 320                                    | 260.2                                   |
| State and local                                          | 1,167  | 1,123                                  | 1,496                                  | -44                                    | -3.8                                 | 373                                    | 33.2                                    |
| Education                                                | 600    | 543                                    | 851                                    | -57                                    | -9.5                                 | 308                                    | 56.7                                    |
| Excluding education                                      | 565    | 577                                    | 647                                    | 12                                     | 2.1                                  | 70                                     | 12.1                                    |
| Region                                                   |        |                                        |                                        |                                        |                                       |                                        |                                        |
| Northeast                                                | 3,930  | 3,968                                  | 8,244                                  | 38                                     | 1.0                                  | 4,276                                  | 107.8                                   |
| South                                                    | 8,353  | 8,248                                  | 13,329                                 | -105                                   | -1.3                                 | 5,081                                  | 61.6                                    |
| Midwest                                                  | 4,788  | 4,419                                  | 9,136                                  | -369                                   | -7.7                                 | 4,717                                  | 106.7                                   |
| West                                                     | 4,733  | 5,217                                  | 10,309                                 | 484                                    | 10.2                                 | 5,092                                  | 97.6                                    |

Note: Details may not sum to totals because of rounding.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.
Table 9. Change in level and percentage of annual other separations, by industry and region, not seasonally adjusted, December 2018–December 2020 (levels in thousand)

| Industry and region                              | Level | Change, December 2018 to December 2019 | Change, December 2019 to December 2020 |
|--------------------------------------------------|-------|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
|                                                  | 2018  | 2019        | 2020        | Level | Percent | Level | Percent |
| Total                                            | 4,066 | 3,997      | 4,159      | -69   | -1.7    | 162   | 4.1     |
| Industry                                         |       |            |            |       |         |       |         |
| Total private                                    | 3,339 | 3,262      | 3,226      | -77   | -2.3    | -36   | -1.1    |
| Mining and logging                               | 21    | 17         | 19         | -4    | -19.0   | 2     | 11.8    |
| Construction                                     | 155   | 201        | 155        | 46    | 29.7    | -46   | -22.9   |
| Manufacturing                                    | 246   | 244        | 283        | -2    | -0.8    | 39    | 16.0    |
| Durable goods                                    | 161   | 154        | 166        | -7    | -4.3    | 12    | 7.8     |
| Nondurable goods                                 | 88    | 89         | 117        | 1     | 1.1     | 28    | 31.5    |
| Trade, transportation, and utilities             | 835   | 745        | 636        | -90   | -10.8   | -109  | -14.6   |
| Wholesale trade                                  | 146   | 102        | 80         | -44   | -30.1   | -22   | -21.6   |
| Retail trade                                     | 543   | 466        | 330        | -77   | -14.2   | -136  | -29.2   |
| Transportation, warehousing, and utilities       | 147   | 178        | 226        | 31    | 21.1    | 48    | 27.0    |
| Information                                      | 80    | 86         | 63         | 6     | 7.5     | -23   | -26.7   |
| Financial activities                             | 294   | 305        | 313        | 11    | 3.7     | 8     | 2.6     |
| Finance and insurance                            | 256   | 260        | 245        | 4     | 1.6     | -15   | -5.8    |
| Real estate and rental and leasing               | 37    | 44         | 68         | 7     | 18.9    | 24    | 54.5    |
| Professional and business services               | 745   | 698        | 817        | -47   | -6.3    | 119   | 17.0    |
| Education and health services                    | 554   | 493        | 532        | -61   | -11.0   | 39    | 7.9     |
| Educational services                             | 68    | 65         | 58         | -3    | -4.4    | -7    | -10.8   |
| Healthcare and social assistance                 | 484   | 428        | 474        | -56   | -11.6   | 46    | 10.7    |
| Leisure and hospitality                          | 303   | 333        | 304        | 30    | 9.9     | -29   | -8.7    |
| Arts, entertainment, and recreation              | 42    | 36         | 29         | -6    | -14.3   | -7    | -19.4   |
| Accommodation and food services                  | 259   | 296        | 274        | 37    | 14.3    | -22   | -7.4    |
| Other services                                   | 115   | 141        | 101        | 26    | 22.6    | -40   | -28.4   |
| Government                                       | 724   | 736        | 934        | 12    | 1.7     | 198   | 26.9    |
| Federal                                          | 127   | 140        | 156        | 13    | 10.2    | 16    | 11.4    |
| State and local                                  | 595   | 596        | 777        | 1     | 0.2     | 181   | 30.4    |
| Education                                        | 284   | 287        | 438        | 3     | 1.1     | 151   | 52.6    |
| Excluding education                              | 310   | 309        | 340        | -1    | -0.3    | 31    | 10.0    |
| Region                                           |       |            |            |       |         |       |         |
| Northeast                                       | 769   | 722        | 668        | -47   | -6.1    | -54   | -7.5    |
| South                                           | 1,480 | 1,503      | 1,549      | 23    | 1.6     | 46    | 3.1     |
| Midwest                                         | 844   | 794        | 867        | -50   | -5.9    | 73    | 9.2     |
| West                                            | 970   | 977        | 1,077      | 7     | 0.7     | 100   | 10.2    |

Note: Details may not sum to totals because of rounding.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Components of separations by industry
As mentioned previously, separations are the total number of employees separated from their employer at any time during the reference month. Separations consist of quits, layoffs and discharges, and other separations. This section discusses what happened in 2020 with the components of separations by industry.

**Quits**

Quits include employees who left their job voluntarily, excluding retirements or transfers to other locations, which are counted as other separations. In 2020, the number of annual quits grew in 3 of 19 industries, while the remaining 16 industries had fewer quits. The largest percentage increases in annual quits levels were in federal government (+18.3 percent), followed by state and local government education (+16.4 percent), and healthcare and social assistance (+0.1 percent). Of note, the increased quits in federal government were primarily driven by changes in employment needed for the 2020 Decennial Census. The largest percentage decreases in annual quits levels were in arts, entertainment, and recreation (−40.9 percent), followed by mining and logging (−39.7 percent), and other services (−33.5 percent). (See table 7.)

Two of nineteen industries reached a series high for the annual level of quits in 2020. These two industries are healthcare and social assistance, at 4.9 million, and state and local government education, at 1.3 million. (See table 4.) Four of nineteen industries reached monthly seasonally adjusted series highs for quits in 2020. Those industries were retail trade, at 594,000 in January; healthcare and social assistance, at 467,000 in October: transportation, warehousing, and utilities, at 170,000 in December: and state and local government education, at 147,000 in July. (See table 2.) Two industries reached monthly seasonally adjusted series lows for quits in 2020: arts, entertainment, and recreation, at 11,000 in August, and other services, at 36,000 in May. (See table 5.)

**Layoffs and discharges**

As defined earlier, layoffs and discharges include involuntary separations initiated by the employer, including layoffs with no intent to rehire. In 2020, annual layoffs and discharges increased in all 19 industries. The largest percentage increases in annual layoffs and discharges were in federal government (+260.2 percent), accommodation and food services (+241.0 percent), and other services (+218.6 percent). The industries with the lowest percentage increases in annual layoffs and discharges were in state and local government, excluding education (+12.1 percent), construction (+24.5 percent), and professional and business services (+28.1 percent). (See table 7.) Notably, the increase in federal government layoffs and discharges was primarily driven by the 2020 Decennial Census concluding; the widespread increases among other industries were mainly due to the economic recession caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the efforts to contain it.

Twelve of nineteen industries reached a series high for the annual level of layoffs and discharges. The largest series highs industries were in accommodation and food services, at 8.8 million; professional and business services, at 6.5 million; and retail trade, at 4.4 million. (See table 4.) There were no annual series lows in layoffs and discharges. In 2020, 17 industries reached a series high for monthly layoffs and discharges. The largest series highs among the industries were in accommodation and food services, at 4.6 million in March; retail trade, at 1.4 million in March; and professional and business services, at 1.3 million in March. (See table 2.) As a measure of the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, all 17 industries monthly series highs occurred in March or April. For monthly layoffs and discharges, four industries reached a series low in 2020. The three lowest monthly layoffs and
discharges were in state and local government, excluding education, at 9,000 in August; other services, at 15,000 in August; and wholesale trade, at 20,000 in September. (See table 5.)

Other separations

In 2020, annual other separations increased in 10 of 19 industries, with 9 industries having fewer annual other separations than in the previous year. The largest percentage increase in annual other separations were in real estate and rental and leasing (+54.5 percent), state and local government education (+52.6 percent), and nondurable goods manufacturing (+31.5 percent). The industries with the largest percentage declines in annual other separations were in retail trade (−29.2 percent), other services (−28.4 percent), and information (−26.7 percent). (See table 8.) Two of nineteen industries reached a series high for the annual level of other separations: state and local government education, and transportation, warehousing, and utilities at 438,000 and 226,000, respectively. Two of nineteen industries reached series lows in the annual level of other separations: wholesale trade and retail trade at 80,000 and 330,000, respectively. (See table 4.) There were two monthly seasonally adjusted series highs in other separations: professional and business services at 114,000 in April, and state and local government education at 52,000 in July. Three of nineteen industries had monthly seasonally adjusted series lows in other separations: educational services at 1,000 in June and July, other services at 1,000 in June, and retail trade at 11,000 in May. (See table 2 and 5.)

Components of separations by region

The U.S. regions were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic at different rates and levels. This section describes the differences with the components of separations among the regions in 2020.

Northeast region

In 2020, the Northeast region had an annual level of 13.9 million total separations, an increase of 33.9 percent and the highest increase of all the regions. The Northeast region quits level decreased to 5.0 million (−12.4 percent), the lowest level of the regions. For layoffs and discharges, the Northeast region rose notably to 8.2 million, the largest percentage (+107.7 percent) increase of the four regions. The Northeast region other separations level declined to 668,000, the only percentage (−7.5 percent) decline of the four regions.

South region

In the South region, the annual level of total separations rose to 30.1 million, the lowest percentage (+11.5 percent) increase of the regions. Within total separations, the quits level fell to 15.3 million for the South region, the largest percentage decline (−11.6 percent) of the regions. The South region layoffs and discharges level rose to 13.3 million, the lowest percentage increase (+61.6 percent) of the regions, and the other separations level rose to 1.5 million, increasing over the year (+3.1 percent).

Midwest region

In the Midwest region, the annual total separations level rose to 18.1 million (+25.7 percent). Within total separations, there were 8.1 million (−11.9 percent) quits in the Midwest region and 9.1 million (+106.7 percent) layoffs and discharges. Other separations rose to 867,000 (+9.2 percent).
West region

The West region had an annual total separations level increase of 19.4 million (+19.6 percent). Within total separations in the West region, the quits level decreased to 8.0 million, the largest percentage (−20.2 percent) decrease among the regions. The layoffs and discharges level rose to 10.3 million (+97.6 percent), and the other separations level rose to 1.1 million, the largest percentage increase (+10.2 percent) of the regions. (See tables 6, 7, 8, and 9.)

Separations for the regions

With annual total separations and layoffs and discharges, all four regions saw series highs in 2020. (See table 4.) The Northeast region reached a series low with other separations. All four regions reached a monthly series high for total separation in March 2020. The Northeast region total separations level reached a monthly series high of 3.3 million, the South region total separations level reached a monthly series high of 5.4 million, and the Midwest and West regions both reached a monthly series high of 3.8 million. All four regions reached a monthly series high for layoffs and discharges in March 2020. The Northeast region layoffs and discharges level reached a series high of 2.8 million, the South region total separations level reached a series high of 4.1 million, and the Midwest and West regions both reached a series high of 3.1 million. None of the four regions reached monthly series highs for quits and other separations. (See table 2 and 4.)

The South region was the only region that reached a monthly series low for layoffs and discharges, with a level of 502,000 in September 2020. No region reached a series low in total separations, quits, and other separations. (See tables 5.)

An analysis of each region by the components as a percentage of total separations illustrates the different characteristics of the JOLTS data at the regional level. The Northeast region had the smallest percentage of quits within total separations, at 35.9 percent in 2020. The South region experienced the highest percentage of quits, at 50.6 percent. In 2020, the Northeast region had the largest percentage of layoff and discharges within total separations, at 59.2 percent. The South region had the lowest percentage of layoffs and discharges, at 44.3 percent. The West region had the highest percentage of other separations, at 5.6 percent, while the Northeast and Midwest regions had the lowest percentage, at 4.8 percent. (See chart 4.)
Quits compared with layoffs and discharges

Over the period from July 2011 to February 2020, there were 104 consecutive months in which the monthly quits level exceeded the monthly layoffs and discharges level. During this period, the gap between the level of quits and the level of layoffs and discharges continued to widen. This growing gap is attributable to a persistent rise in the number of quits while the number of layoffs and discharges remained flat. However, with the onset of the pandemic, this persistent trend of quits exceeding layoffs and discharges reversed suddenly. In March 2020, layoffs and discharges exceeded quits by 10.1 million. This large gap was caused by a sharp increase in layoffs and discharges and a substantial decline in quits. In April 2020, the gap narrowed slightly to 7.2 million. In May, the pattern of quits exceeding layoffs and discharges returned to pre-COVID pandemic levels and remained over the rest of the year. (See chart 5.)
Summary

JOLTS 2020 data reflect the effects, efforts to mitigate, and the recovery of the U.S. labor market caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many establishments either closed or operated on a limited capacity because of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the start of 2020, the job openings level trended higher until the COVID-19 pandemic affected the U.S. economy in March 2020. Although job openings declined early in the year, job openings slowly trended up by the end of the year. In 2020, the number of hires reached a series high after the notable declines in March and April; however, by the end of 2020, the number of hires decreased to pre-COVID-19 levels. The number of total separations also reached a series high in 2020. This was mainly attributed to the large rise in layoff and discharges, which also rose to a series high. Total separations gradually trended back toward pre-COVID-19 levels later in the year.

Larry Akinyooye and Eric Nezamis, "As the COVID-19 pandemic affects the nation, hires and turnover reach record highs in 2020," Monthly Labor Review, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, June 2021, https://doi.org/10.21916/mlr.2021.11.
1. JOLTS produces monthly data on job openings, hires, quits, layoffs and discharges, and other separations from a sample of approximately 21,000 establishments. This sample consists of establishments from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and all nonfarm industries as classified by the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS). The JOLTS sample allows publication of data by four census regions and by select two-digit NAICS codes. For more information on the program’s concepts and methodology, see “Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey: Handbook of Methods (Washington, DC: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, July 13, 2020), https://www.bls.gov/opub/hom/jlt/home.htm. See also the JOLTS page on the BLS website, at https://www.bls.gov/jlt/. All annual data are not seasonally adjusted, and all monthly data are seasonally adjusted. Over-the-year changes are calculated from December of the previous year through December of the reference year.

2. JOLTS estimates are produced by region for the Northeast, the South, the Midwest, and the West.

3. According to the finance and investment education website Investopedia, procyclical “refers to a condition of a positive correlation between the value of a good, a service, or an economic indicator and the overall state of the economy. In other words, the value of the good, service, or indicator tends to move in the same direction as the economy, growing when the economy grows and declining when the economy declines.” For more information, see Akhilesh Ganti, “Procyclic,” Investopedia, updated March 4, 2021, http://www.investopedia.com/terms/p/procyclical.asp.

4. For more information, see “What Principal Federal Economic Indicators (PFEIs) are published by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics?” News Room—Frequently Asked Questions (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, December 29, 2016), https://www.bls.gov/newsroom/faqs.htm. For more on the background, see “Statistical Policy Directive No. 3: Compilation, Release, and Evaluation of Principal Federal Economic Indicators,” Federal Register, vol. 50, no. 186, September 25, 1985. For more on the concepts of leading, coincident, and lagging economic indicators, see “Description of components” (The Conference Board, February 6, 2012), https://www.conference-board.org/data/bci/index.cfm?id=2160.

5. BLS considers job openings a stock measure and does not produce job openings annual totals.

6. Countercyclical is a condition of negative correlation in which the value of the good, service or indicator moves “in the opposite direction of the overall economic cycle: rising when the economy is weakening, and falling when the economy is strengthening.” For more information, see InvestorWords, http://www.investorwords.com/1166/countercyclical.html.

7. The National Bureau of Economic Research is the official arbiter of the beginning and ending dates of U.S. business cycle expansions and contractions. For more information, see “U.S. Business cycle dating” (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, September 20, 2010), http://www.nber.org/cycles/.

8. The large increase in annual hires for the federal government was largely the result of the hiring of temporary Census 2020 workers in late summer 2019.

Related Articles

Job openings, hires, and quits set record highs in 2019, Monthly Labor Review, June 2020.

Job openings, hires, and quits reach historic highs in 2018, Monthly Labor Review, July 2019.

Job openings and labor turnover trends for Metropolitan Statistical Areas in 2019, Beyond the Numbers, September 2020.