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WASHINGTON (AP) — Fewer U.S. states reported job gains last month, reflecting a slower pace of hiring nationwide.

The Labor Department says that 29 states reported job gains in March, while 20 states lost jobs. That's worse than February, when 42 states added jobs.

Still, the unemployment rate fell in most states: 30 states reported lower rates in March while 8 reported increases. Rates were unchanged in 12 states.

Nationwide, the unemployment rate fell to 8.2 percent in March from 8.3 percent. But employers added only 120,000 jobs, half the pace of the previous three months.

That dip in hiring, along with recent increases in the number of people seeking unemployment benefits, has raised some concerns that job gains could slow in coming months.

The biggest job declines were reported in Ohio, which lost 9,500 jobs, and New Jersey, which lost 8,600 positions. Wisconsin posted the third biggest loss, a decline of 4,500.

Some states reported healthy job gains: New York added 19,100 jobs, California gained 18,200 and Arizona said employers added 13,500 jobs.

Nevada has the nation's highest unemployment rate, at 12 percent. That's down from 12.3 percent in February. Rhode Island reported the next highest rate, at 11.1 percent, down from 11.2 percent. And California has the third-highest rate, at 11 percent, up from the previous month's 10.9 percent.

North Dakota's 3 percent unemployment rate is the lowest in the nation, the report said. That's down from 3.1 percent in the previous month. Nebraska has the second-lowest, at 4 percent, down from 4.1 percent. South Dakota has the third-lowest rate, at 4.3 percent, the same as the previous month.

The report comes after some disappointing economic data Thursday. The average number of people seeking unemployment benefits nationwide in the past month is at a three-month high. Home sales slowed last month after healthy gains over the winter. And manufacturing in the mid-Atlantic region declined in April, a separate report found.

Despite the negative reports, most economists expect modest growth to continue this year. The economy likely expanded at a 2.5 percent annual pace in the January-March quarter, down slightly from 3 percent growth in the fourth quarter.

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The government will issue its first estimate of January-March growth next Friday.

Economists said temporary layoffs stemming from the spring holidays may have inflated the unemployment benefit figures. Some school employees are laid off during spring break and are eligible to file for benefits.

Many economists have also downplayed the weak March hiring figures, noting that a warmer winter may have also led to some earlier hiring in January and February. They have noted that the economy has added an average of 212,000 jobs per month in the January-March quarter, well ahead of last year's pace.

Most are waiting to see the April jobs report before concluding that hiring has stalled. That report will be released on May 4.

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