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DEMAND FOR CONSTRUCTION WORKERS SOFT, EVEN AFTER HURRICANES

Number of construction-job openings in September down from August, in line with recent average

By Eric Morath
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National demand for construction workers remains relatively subdued, even after hurricanes slammed the southern U.S. late this summer.

In the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Harvey striking the Houston region, **construction firms feared they would face a shortage of workers** as they began rebuilding storm-damaged communities. Those fears intensified when Hurricane Irma approached Florida less than two weeks later.

But the first national look at job openings by industry after the storms showed the need for construction workers declined slightly in September. There were 196,000 job openings in the construction industry at the end of the month, down from 230,000 in August, **new Labor Department data showed**. The September reading was roughly in line with the 190,000 openings averaged monthly over the year ended in August.

The Labor Department data are national and might not reflect local shortages occurring in Texas, or elsewhere. But the overall construction field didn't see an immediate jump in demand for workers after Harvey and Irma.

Industry-level job openings can be volatile from month-to-month. But a broader look shows the 12-month average of construction-job openings is only slightly above its level in late 2007, when the deep recession began.

Meanwhile, national job openings are near a record high, with the 12-month average up about 30 percent from the start of the recession. Job openings in the health-care field are up more than 50 percent; **openings in retail are up 48 percent**.

The relatively soft demand for construction workers reflects home building that remains well below its prerecession peak. Builders this year started construction on new homes at just more than half the pace averaged in 2005 and 2006, the peak of the housing bubble.

Commercial construction has perked up this year, but grew at a very slow rate in 2015 and 2016, in part reflecting the retrenching of the domestic energy industry.