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Consumer confidence, home sales and Midwestern manufacturing all slipped below economists' expectations in reports released today, amidst persistent concerns over the labor market and worries that the economy's recent robust gains may be easing.

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And consumer confidence backed off its recent surge, as more Americans expressed anxieties over business conditions and the availability of jobs, said the Conference Board, a private research group in New York.

"All three were a little bit weaker than expected, basically," said Jan Hatzius, a senior economist at the Goldman Sachs Group Inc., who called the "fairly substantial decline in labor market assessments" an "interesting and somewhat cautionary note."

The reports underscored two clouds hanging over the economic recovery: improving but still sluggish hiring and a housing market that may be losing steam after sustaining the economy through its long doldrums.

"A true recovery is finally underway, which is good. Two years into it and this is first time we can say that," said Jared Bernstein, an economist at the Economic Policy Institute. "At the same time, it's still a fragile one, and it still hasn't found strong legs."

Consumer confidence in November was at its highest level in 14 months, but this month, it slipped back to an index level of 91.3, from a revised November level of 92.5. The composite index is based on a comparative level of 100 set in 1985.

Out of 5,000 households surveyed, the number saying jobs are "hard to get" rose to 32.6 percent this month, from 29.6 percent. The number saying jobs are "plentiful" slipped to 12.5 percent, from 13.5 percent. Americans' appraisal of business conditions also lost ground, according to the survey.

"Job worries continue," said Lynn Franco, director of the Conference Board's Consumer Research Center.

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That sentiment may reflect a disconnect that Americans feel between the upbeat economic numbers trumpeted in the press and their own experiences, Bernstein said. The economy grew at a stellar 8.2 percent pace between July and September, but inflation-adjusted wages rose a scant 0.2 percent over that period and figures for the final quarter of 2003 are expected to show an actual decline.

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