

Stealth signs of a stronger job market

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NEW YORK (CNNMoney) -- What do higher mileage on leased cars, more crowded day care centers and fewer disability claims all have in common?

They're all under-the-radar signs of improvement in the U.S. economy.

While conventional indicators like the unemployment rate and initial jobless claims are pointing to some improvement in the job market, they're still at pretty high levels.

But a few non-traditional readings are also encouraging signs that Americans really are heading back to work. **More miles driven:** Car leasing web site LeaseTrader.com, reported this week that Americans are driving their vehicles more.

As of the beginning of February, the number of "under driven" leased vehicles being turned in -- those that used fewer miles than what was allotted for the lease period -- fell to 29%. That's down from 35% in September.

Plus, the mileage on the "under driven" cars also increased to 80% of the allowed miles, up from only 60% in September.

Sergio Stiberman, LeaseTrader.com CEO, said the increase in mileage is a sign that more people are commuting to work again.

"While unemployment remains at still-high numbers, there continues to be a strengthening of the economy that is putting people back on the roads," said

Stiberman.

He said his data also shows more small businesses leasing vehicles, another sign of improvement.

More kids in daycare: Another way to gauge the health of the labor market is by looking at the number of workers employed at day care centers, according to **Bernard Baumohl** of the Economic Outlook Group, a Princeton, N.J. research firm.

Hiring at day care centers is increasing faster than the hiring being reported by businesses overall -- up 0.3% in January and almost 1% since August.

The uptick in hiring is a sure sign of rising demand for childcare, Baumohl said

"People need more day care when they've got jobs to go to," he said.

Fewer disability claims: In a sign that some people with mild health issues are finding jobs again, there's also been a drop in the number of people filing for disability insurance with the Social Security Administration.

Disability benefits are frequently used by workers who have health problems that might not keep them out of work in a stronger economy, but who have more trouble landing or holding a job in a weak labor market.

The number of workers who applied for benefits soared by more than a third during the worst of the recession.

But that increase in applications has started to recede. The three-month moving average of disability claims has tumbled 20% since October, to the lowest three-month average since the end of 2008.