The new homes of greater Orlando are built by tens of thousands of men and women who work in the murky world of subcontractors.

Often rushed and poorly supervised, the so-called “subs” sweep onto a job, complete their individualized tasks as swiftly as possible, then move on to the next site.

The faster they lay block or drive nails or run air-conditioning ducts, the more money they make. Production is key, critics say, not quality.

“Speed is of the essence. Time is money. The profit motive is driving everyone to move too quickly,” said Don Rattner, a New York City architect and town planner.

That pressure often results in shoddy work, a yearlong investigation by the Orlando Sentinel and WESH-NewsChannel 2 found.

Sentinel/WESH inspections of 406 homes built during 2001 discovered hundreds of examples of poor-quality construction: concrete-block walls that had little or no mortar in the joints; stucco so thinly applied that the outline of the blocks underneath was visible; air-conditioning ducts bent at such sharp angles that almost no cool air could get through; metal-frame windows jammed into crooked openings in the wall.

Such carelessness is the result of building too many houses too fast, with workers who have little training and not enough oversight, builders and hired hands say. Adding to the problem is the fact that many workers can’t speak or read English, or decipher a blueprint.

Private home inspector Kelvin Eder recalled finding poorly installed roof trusses in one west Orange County house — because the crew could not read English.

As long as a picture was available, the trusses were aligned perfectly, he said. But some connection points were wrong, he said, because the framers could not follow the written details on how the work was to be done.

Combines all the problems — unskilled labor, spotty supervision, rushed work schedules, language issues — and the result is “just bad construction,” custom-home carpenter Richard Taylor said.

More than 100 trades

Although consumers buy their new homes from builders, the actual work is done by subcontractors. Builders typically hire three different kinds of subcontractors — office workers, superintendents and a bunch of independent contractors — and they’re not everything equal.

In some cases, for example, the local builder might use one local subcontractor for a job, then subcontract that work to a national firm, which is, in turn, subcontracted to the builder’s responsibility.

Labor, which account for 25 percent of the cost of a
Labor can be 25% of home's cost

From page A13

Table One. Some of the areas in which the builder cut costs are: interior finishes, materials, and labor. Interior finishes include carpeting, trim, and wall coverings. Materials include plumbing, electrical, and heating and cooling systems. Labor includes the cost of skilled and unskilled labor.

Table Two. The cost of labor can be divided into three categories: carpenters, masons, and drywallers. These categories are further divided into subcategories: carpenters, woodworkers, and sheet metal workers; masons, bricklayers, and block layers; and drywallers, plasterers, and insulation workers.

Table Three. The average wage for each category is calculated by dividing the total number of hours worked by the total number of employees.

Table Four. The average wage for each category is calculated by dividing the total number of hours worked by the total number of employees.

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Jobs lack benefits, overtime pay, but illegals can’t gripe

By DAN TRACY

THE BUILDERS ASSOCIATION's AFJL/CIO, in Orlando, has asked its members to ensure that their employees are here legally. "If there is no work, there is no work," said Carl Engelmeier, president of the Home Builders Association of Central Florida. "But if there is work, they are not going to get it." He said he does not check everybody who is on the job or in the building. "If they are not there, they can't work, they can't get paid." He said his company only hires legal workers, but illegal workers are often hired by subcontractors. "If they are not working, they are not getting paid," said Engelmeier.

The builders say it's the subs' obligation to ensure that their employees are here legally. They are hired by subcontractors to build the houses, they do not work for the builders. They are afraid to complain or seek medical attention for the scabbed, cracked in walls, driveways and patios; widespread problems, including major repairs, may be made at the job site.

"It is a difficult situation," said Walt McGuire, a business agent for the Carpenters and Lathers Local Union No. 1765 in South Orlando. "In some cases, they are not getting paid what they should be." He said it is difficult to track who is working on a job site because of the high turnover. "The workers are afraid to complain," he said. "They don't want to get in trouble." The workers are afraid to seek medical attention for the scabbed, cracked in walls, driveways and patios.

"It's a messy situation," said McGuire. "They don't want to get into trouble." He said it is difficult to track who is working on a job site because of the high turnover. "The workers are afraid to complain," he said. "They don't want to get in trouble." The workers are afraid to seek medical attention for the scabbed, cracked in walls, driveways and patios.

"It's just a scratch," Roberto said of a scratch on his face. He said he was working on a job site and was injured. "I didn't tell the builder because, like most builders, he had little interaction with the hired hands. A small cut could lead to昀 serious injury."

Typically, migrants have little formal education and are not paid overtime. They are paid $7 an hour, with no overtime pay, regardless of how many hours they work. They are afraid to complain or seek medical attention for the scabbed, cracked in walls, driveways and patios.

"I didn't think anyone would care," Roberto said of a scratch on his face. He said he was working on a job site and was injured. "I didn't tell the builder because, like most builders, he had little interaction with the hired hands. A small cut could lead to昀 serious injury." He said he was paid $7 an hour, with no overtime pay, regardless of how many hours he worked. He said he was afraid to complain or seek medical attention for the scabbed, cracked in walls, driveways and patios.

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Migrants collect their pay in cash

Another card that aids migrants is called a matrícula consular. Mexican consuls in many American cities issue these cards to migrants. A matrícula can give the holder at least the appearance of being a legal resident. The cards are in the country legally, only that the holder is a native of Mexico. But it can only be used for limited purposes, such as registering to vote or applying for a driver's license.

Social Security cards are key

Any of the above cards can be used to open bank accounts or get a job, but to authenticate a Mexican is more difficult. That's why Social Security cards are key to many migrants. The Social Security Administration reviews records for 2000, it found that almost $6 billion in employee contributions could not be matched to individual Social Security numbers. The agency speculates that most discrepancies have been caused by fraud or administrative errors. The Social Security Administration has taken steps to correct them, but many migrants are still waiting.

The most common is a fake Social Security card. The cards can be bought for about $30, and the going rate is about $150. Gaspar said he has never been asked for a Social Security card. His pay is better and steadier. He told his friends and family.

The threat is not as great as they imagine. Fear of deportation is a very real part of every illegal migrant's life, even though they have a steady income and home and living in Central Florida. It's not as if they will send them home if their true status is discovered during something as common as a traffic violation or a routine traffic stop. For us, it is not important. It's a way, a routine traffic stop. The threat of deportation is not as great as they imagine. They just go at it.

Social Security spokesman Mark Hinkle said. "They just go at it." The threat of deportation is not as great as they imagine. They just go at it.

"These guys are working fools," Cuevas said. "If you put them up quick and they're not going to attack them, they're not going to attack them."

In Orlando, Hispanics fare a little better than their counterparts nationally, $420 a week versus $623, according to a wage analysis done by the Pew Hispanic Center in Washington.

But many immigration experts say the threat of deportation is not as great as they imagine. They just go at it.

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