

## BUILDING HOMES BUILDING PROBLEMS



ROBERTO GONZALEZ/ORLANDO SENTINEL

**Going up.** Mexican laborers work on new homes recently at Baldwin Park in Orlando. There are more Mexican migrants working residential construction in Central Florida — at least 25,000 — than any other ethnicity. Without them to hammer nails, lay block and install windows, the construction industry would grind to a halt.

PART 3

# Homes often are rush jobs, critics assert

*Fast work by subcontractors'  
unskilled labor leads to flaws*

By DAN TRACY  
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

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.

Combine 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 maintain small full-time staffs — office workers, salespeople and a handful of superintendents — and hire out everything else.

More than 100 trades — each one a subcontractor — may work on a single house before it is finished. Overseen by a supervisor employed by the builder, subs put together the various components of a house, such as framing, concrete, electrical, plumbing and roofs. The final product, however, remains the builder's responsibility.

Labor, which can account for 25 percent of the cost of a

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# Labor can be 25% of home's cost

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house, is one of the areas in which the builder can exercise some control. Unlike the cost of materials and land, which often are non-negotiable, the builder can reduce labor charges by paying lower wages or employing fewer workers.

That, in turn, squeezes the subs, who frequently skirt the law to remain competitive and profitable, say those involved in the region's \$2 billion-a-year residential-construction industry.

Subs often lower their bids by paying workers cash, thus avoiding taxes and workers-compensation insurance premiums, which can add up to 50 percent of payroll costs. They also hire undocumented migrants, many of whom will work for low pay and no benefits.

By some estimates, illegal migrants, mostly Mexicans, make up half of the 50,000 people in residential construction in the region. The 2000 census found only 10,000 Hispanic construction workers, a number considered ridiculously low by many in the trade.

It is difficult to count people who do not want to be noticed, much less be part of a government survey. Many undocumented migrants have no permanent address, bunking with one friend or another and catching rides to the job.

"It's kind of like a big underground, a subculture, an under-the-table work force," said Carl Engelmeier, who owns E.H. Engelmeier Roofing of Orlando and says he does not hire illegal migrants or cheat in other ways.

Few in the know dispute him. Yet no one will admit to these practices, at least not publicly. The reason: It is against the law and punishable by fines, jail time and deportation.

"It does go on a lot," said Jeffrey Korte, bureau chief of workers-compensation fraud for the Florida Department of Financial Services. He fields calls daily about subs cheating on insurance and taxes while employing illegal migrants, primarily Mexicans.

But proving those claims is difficult, he said. Often, he said, he is given few or no specifics, such as the name of the supposed

tion and masonry — accounted for large numbers of workmanship problems found in the 406 randomly selected homes. With a 5 percent margin of error, it is the first statistically valid measure of new-home construction in Florida and likely the nation.

Many carpentry problems are covered by stucco or drywall, but their flaws are evident in roofs that sag because the trusses were installed incorrectly, or in the windows that leak or have cracks around them because the opening left for them was not square. Nearly 80 percent had uneven ceilings and walls and other drywall problems. And more than 6 in 10 had major cracking in the exterior walls, driveways, floors and decking.

Likely causes of the concrete problems, Amback said, were using watered-down concrete, not allowing the foundation pads to dry long enough — both of which greatly reduce the material's strength — and putting too little mortar between the block walls' joints.

"They're slamming it up," Amback said of many masons. "Nothing is level; nothing is plumb."

### Relying on superintendents

Although the subs do all the heavy lifting, the builders count on their superintendents to ensure that the work is done right. That system doesn't always work.

In popular subdivisions, it is not uncommon for production supervisors to be in charge of 20 or more houses going up at once. Only an experienced and dedicated manager can handle such a load, said Ron Resch, a 12-year veteran home inspector and paid consultant to the *Sentinel* and WESH.

"Twenty houses is a lot of houses to watch," Resch said. "It all depends on the supervisor himself. Each individual has different capabilities."

Homeowners complain frequently that they catch mistakes while the house is being built that the supervisors should have noted and corrected.

Jack Baumgardner, for instance, said his builder had to install the windows in the entertainment room of his \$400,000 house in southeast Orange County three times before they were done right. Such mistakes were among the reasons Baumgardner moved into his house four months late.

"If I was managing it, I could get it done [on time]," the 55-year-old electrical engineer said.

Lackluster supervision and a finish-it-yesterday mentality by subs often lead to sloppy work, said Braden Souder, 20, a masonry foreman who works for his father's company. He described the supervisory attitude at many job sites as: "You guys need to hurry up and get it done, get it done."

Jose, an illegal migrant who has worked as a mason for three years, said his 24-member crew does good work when told to put up the walls of one house in a day. But two in a day is iffy, he said, and three is bad, resulting in callbacks to fix sloppy work.

Although he could not provide a percentage, he said his crew often has to build more than one house in day because of backups caused by rain, supply shortages — or a good week by the sales staff.

"You just do what you have to," he said through an interpreter. He asked that his full name not be used for fear of deportation.

Souder agrees that many subs speed through work to boost their pay. He said he works hard but does not sacrifice quality for a few extra dollars.

"I just try to do a good job," he said, "the best work I can."

### Lower pay for building homes

Union officials and industry authorities say residential construction pays 20 percent to 30 percent less than commercial or industrial jobs. The upshot: Workers with skills tend to gravitate to building condominiums or offices or hotels or attraction rides, for better pay and benefits.

And the low pay Mexicans willingly accept undercuts the salaries for everyone in residential construction, said Richard Taylor, a carpenter and subcontractor who frames mostly custom houses in metro Orlando.

Taylor, who said he does not hire illegal migrants, has the same complaint as Engelmeier and Amback. He loses out on jobs, he said, because he pays higher wages — \$12 to \$20 an hour, depending on experience — and workers-compensation coverage.

His pay scale is more than what many production builders pay their subs because the houses he frames generally are more complicated, making skilled hands a necessity.

Taylor, a subcontractor for more than 20 years, said the influx of Mexicans has grown steadily to the point that they now represent at least 50 percent of the residential work force.

Many of the jobs they take were held once by American workers who moved into better-paying industries with more advancement opportunities, said Kurt Morauer, director of training-program development at the National Center for Construction Education and Research in Gainesville.

Labor-recruiting problems, some say, can be traced back half a century, when military veterans began going to college in droves on the GI Bill, eschewing blue-collar trades.

"We've been telling our kids since the 1950s that the only way to be successful was to go to college," Morauer said.

And even the students who are thinking of construction as a career tend to steer clear of residential because of the pay.

"If you want to make money, it's commercial or industrial," said Ahmad Anselme, an 18-year-old Pine Hills resident studying to be an electrician at Mid-Florida Tech.

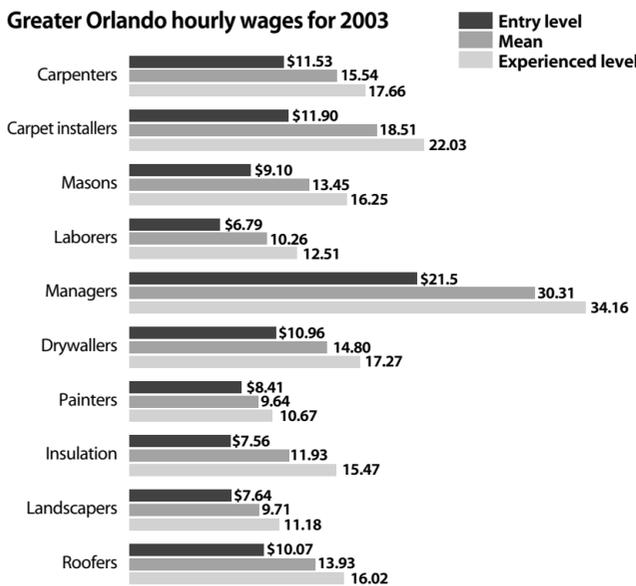
The bottom line: There are more residential-construction jobs than there are people willing to do the work. As many as 400 jobs a day go unfilled in the area, according to state and federal labor agencies.

That deficit provides a perfect opportunity for Mexicans desperate for employment — and for subcontractors to rush from one job to the next.

## PART 3

### LOW PAY MEANS UNSKILLED WORKERS

Because the pay is better, workers with skills tend to gravitate toward commercial or industrial jobs rather than residential construction. And the low pay illegal immigrants accept undercuts the salary structure of those skilled workers who stay in residential construction. A look at Orlando's pay scale:



SOURCE: Florida Agency for Workforce Innovation, Labor Market Statistics

lawbreaking company or the location of the job. In those cases, he said there's nothing he can do: "We can't just go on a witch hunt."

Even so, his office shut down more than 500 subs during the past three years in Orange, Osceola, Seminole, Lake and Brevard counties. They were fined a total of \$1 million, but no one went to jail. There was no breakdown of how many illegal migrants might have been involved.

The production builders responsible for constructing the vast majority of the new homes in Central Florida declined comment for this series, saying they thought they would not be treated fairly.

But several small, custom builders did talk. They said they do not knowingly employ subcontractors who cheat or hire illegal aliens and that the law doesn't require them to check the status of the subs' workers. They also conceded illegals do get hired, saying it is impossible to tell who is lying or showing them fake documents.

"You cannot set up homeland security at the break truck," said Charles Clayton, a custom builder and past president of the Home Builders Association of Metro Orlando.

### Some trades unlicensed

The easiest of the major trades to catch work with are carpentry, masonry and drywall, none of which is licensed by the state.

Electrical, plumbing, HVAC and roofing companies are licensed, meaning they are tracked more closely by the state, and the owners must pass competency tests to operate. There are more than 7,100 state-certified contractors in Central Florida.

A carpentry, masonry or drywall outfit needs only an occupational license, which basically means writing a check to the county or city issuing the document. More than 6,500 subcontractors have occupational licenses just in Orange County.

"Everybody who has a pickup truck is pulling a [cement] mixer behind them," said John Amback, who owns a masonry company in Lake County.

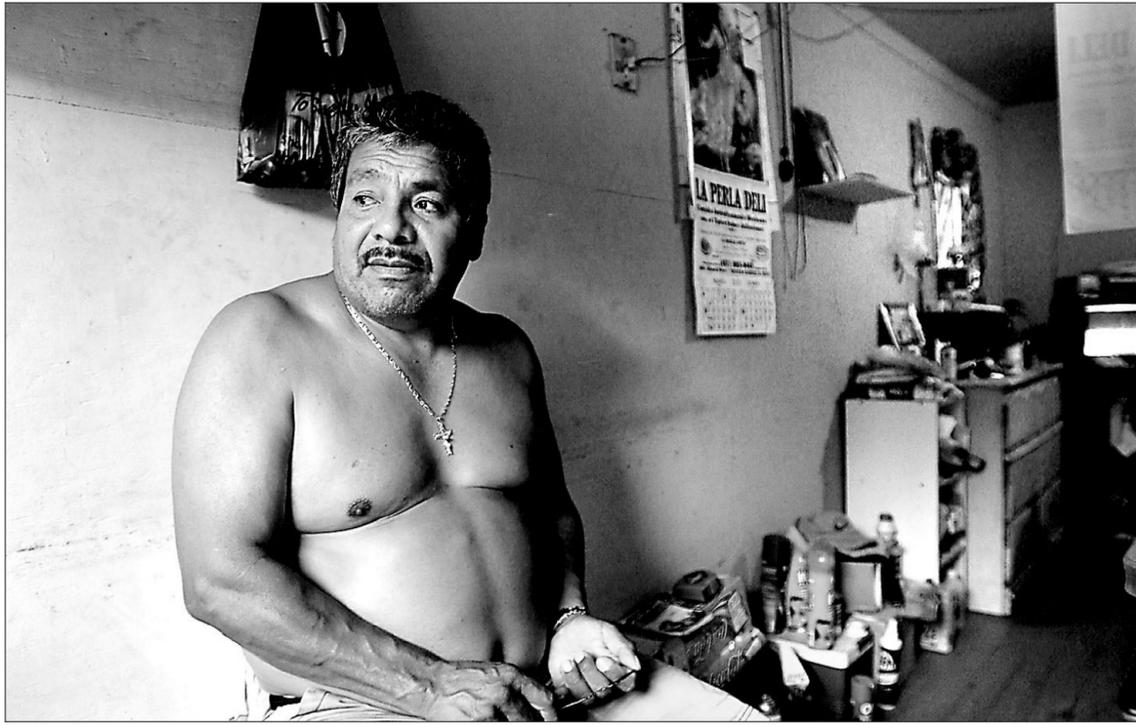
The *Sentinel*/WESH inspections show that work by subcontractors in these three categories — carpentry, drywall installa-

*'It's kind of like a big underground, a subculture, an under-the-table work force.'*

— CARL ENGELMEIER  
OWNER, E.H. ENGELMEIER ROOFING



BUILDING HOMES  
BUILDING PROBLEMS



ROBERTO GONZALEZ/ORLANDO SENTINEL

**Gaspar at home.** The residential-construction worker sits inside his small home in a village of trailers and plywood houses in west Orange County. About 200 migrants live in the village, many from the area of Mexico that was once Gaspar's home.

PART 3

# Jobs lack benefits, overtime pay, but illegals can't gripe

By DAN TRACY  
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

Tino hammers together forms that hold the wet cement that, when it hardens, becomes a driveway or patio or foundation pad for a new home.

He is paid \$9 an hour, with no overtime or benefits. If he is sick or injured and can't work, he isn't paid.

Speaking through an interpreter, he describes lunch: "Have a taco or a sandwich in one hand — and work with the other [hand]."

Tino is in Central Florida illegally. He sneaked into the country from Mexico to make a living as one of the 25,000 or more undocumented migrants — primarily Mexicans — experts say are working in residential construction in the region. Chances are good that someone like Tino has worked on just about every new house built in greater Orlando during recent years.

"If only the legals did the work in this county and state, we wouldn't get much done," said Julian, another illegal migrant.

Poorly supervised and trained, often rushed on the job and struggling with a language gap, these migrants are a key part of the work force responsible for a wave of sloppily built new homes, a year-long investigation by the *Orlando Sentinel* and WESH-NewsChannel 2 has found.

*Sentinel*/WESH inspections of randomly selected homes built during 2001 found widespread problems, including major cracking in walls, driveways and patios;

gally.

That's why when Alex Hannigan, president of the Home Builders Association of Metro Orlando, was asked his estimate of how many illegal migrants work in the industry, he replied that perhaps 20 percent of them are.

He couldn't come up with a solid number because, like most builders, he has little interaction with the hired hands. A small custom builder, his payroll consists of office help and a supervisor or two to watch the subs.

"I don't check everybody who is on the roof or in the building," Hannigan said of the crews that build his houses. "You just can't control that type of thing, and we don't try to."

But it also is difficult for subcontractors to confirm the immigration status of their workers, said Carl Engelmeier, who owns an Orlando roofing company. Engelmeier said he will not hire anyone without a drivers license, Social Security card and, if a migrant, a resident-alien card.

Yet two years ago, he hired a crew of seven Mexicans who each provided documentation — all of it fake.

He said he did not find out until an immigration agent appeared at his office, asking about the crew. He never saw the crew again, Engelmeier said.

"It just kind of blew my mind," he said.

### No experience needed

Experience or ability rarely is a consideration in hiring, the migrants said. A strong back and a willingness to work long and hard are the prime require-

portant jobs, such as framing, hanging drywall or laying block. They typically top out at about \$15 an hour.

Frequently, they are paid in cash, the money handed out on Friday afternoons. They get no overtime or benefits, the migrants said.

Often, they do not know the name of the company employing them. Instead, they know the first or last name of their crew chief, who invariably is bilingual and acts as their interpreter.

Many used to harvest crops, most commonly citrus in Central Florida. Ironically, they face many of the same obstacles in construction that they did in picking: low wages; few, if any, benefits; and an unforgiving work environment.

They are afraid to complain or seek better pay because they are constantly told they are one phone call to the Border Patrol away from being sent back to Mexico, said Fernando Cuevas, a carpenters-union organizer and former farmworker who deals frequently with undocumented workers.

For instance, Roberto, a migrant carpenter, dismissed a 3-inch gash on the left side of his face as not worth discussing. He said it happened on the job, but he would not divulge who his employer was or how or why he was hurt.

"It's just a scratch," Roberto said through an interpreter. He said he did not seek medical attention for the scabbed-over cut because he was afraid he would get in trouble.

He said he makes \$9 an hour and is not paid overtime, regardless of how many hours he works. Like many construction workers, he frequently is on the job Monday through Saturday.

The lack of overtime pay, Cuevas said, is common throughout the nonunion world of home construction.

Union jobs, which represent little more than 1 percent of all carpentry work in Central and North Florida, mandate that employers pay workers extra for overtime and offer sick and vacation benefits. Unions also offer nighttime and weekend classes that teach carpentry techniques and other advanced construction skills.

But the Mexicans can't band together and push for better pay, education and working conditions because they have no legal standing here.

"It's a messy situation. They don't want benefits. They want the money so they can send it home," said Walt McGuire, a business agent for the Carpenters and Lathers Local Union No. 1765 in south Orlando.

Hispanic construction workers earn about two-thirds the median salary of a non-Hispanic white construction worker

*In the 1970s, Gaspar was one of the first from his state in Mexico to arrive in Central Florida. Since then, as many of 30 of his friends and relatives have arrived to work here.*

leaky windows and roofs; mold; and finishing flaws such as corners that aren't square and cabinets that aren't level.

The undocumented migrants in this story spoke on the condition that their full names were not used. They fear being deported.

Although they are the people who actually build the houses, they do not work for the builders. They are hired by subcontractors, to do masonry or carpentry or drywall under the builder's supervision. The builders say it's the subs' obligation to ensure that their employees are here le-

ments. Anything else is taught on site.

"You just do as you are told," said Julian, who began building houses in Florida 10 years ago.

Typically, migrants have little formal education — most haven't finished high school — or construction training other than what they learned in Mexico, working at their home or on the family farm.

They usually start off as laborers, carrying mortar or block or cleaning up, for \$7 an hour. By watching, asking questions and learning on their own, they say they can latch on to better-paying, more-im-

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PHOTOS BY ROBERTO GONZALEZ/ORLANDO SENTINEL

**Life in America.** Gaspar stands outside his small apartment in Orange County. The site houses many Mexican construction workers.

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# Migrants collect their pay in cash

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nationally, \$420 a week versus \$623, according to a wage analysis done by the Pew Hispanic Center in Washington.

In Orlando, Hispanics fare a little better, earning a median of \$10.66 an hour compared with \$14.15 for non-Hispanics, the Pew center said.

"If you put them [houses] up quick and cheap, and you have a very mobile work force that is willing to work by the day or project, that's very desirable for the employer," said Robert Suro, Pew Hispanic Center director.

#### 'You don't want to mess up'

Fear of deportation is a very real part of every illegal migrant's life, even though the threat is not as great as they imagine.

"You don't want to mess up," Antonio said through an interpreter.

About 20 Mexicans a month are caught and deported from Central Florida. Federal and state authorities are not actively seeking Mexicans here illegally, but they will send them home if their true status is discovered during something as common as a routine traffic stop.

As a result, undocumented Mexicans shy from strangers and stay among friends and family.

"It's comfort and security. They know their neighbor is not going to attack them or turn them in," Cuevas said.

A dilapidated village of old trailers and plywood shacks in west Orange County offers a prime example. About 200 migrants live there, at least two dozen from the same region of Mexico, a state in the southern highlands called Michoacán.

Gaspar, a 49-year-old carpenter, was one of the first from Michoacán to arrive in the west Orange County park, pulling in during the 1970s to harvest oranges. Like many pickers, he switched to construction during the 1980s after three hard freezes killed many of the trees, leading growers to sell their groves to developers who cleared the land and built subdivisions.

He said he likes construction because the pay is better and steadier. He told his family back in Michoacán, and word spread through the impoverished countryside, where a year's sharecropping can net a family \$300. Gaspar let them know

he could make that much in a week.

"It's all word of mouth," Cuevas said of the migration to Central Florida. "They go where they get accepted, no questions asked."

Brothers, cousins and friends — as many as 30 from the region — have ended up in Central Florida. Most have stayed at one time or another in the same enclave as Gaspar, who lives alone in a one-bedroom shanty, his leather tool belt hung on a nail hammered into a wood stud.

The accommodations are Spartan, no air conditioning or heat, the electricity routed about his tiny home with extension cords. He pays \$120 a week, which is the going rate.

A man of few words, Gaspar smiles and shrugs when asked whether he likes his home and living in Central Florida. It's not the area that attracts Gaspar so much as the work.

#### Social Security cards are key

One of the keys to getting a job is producing some sort of identification that gives the holder at least the appearance of being a legal resident.

The most common is a fake Social Security card. Phony or stolen Social Security cards used to cost as little as \$30, although the price has gone up to \$100 or more since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, migrants say.

Nationally, so many workers have phony cards that when the Social Security Administration reviewed records for 2000, it found that almost \$6 billion in employee contributions could not be matched to individual workers.

Last year, administration officials tried to contact 950,000 employers and employees to try to resolve these discrepancies, but few responded.

Social Security spokesman Mark Hinkle cited numerous reasons for names and Social Security numbers not matching, including clerical errors and misspellings. But many immigration experts say the major cause is fake or stolen Social Security numbers used by workers in industries that rely on migrant labor, including restaurants, agriculture and construction.

The money that can't be assigned to an employee is placed into a general fund, Hinkle said.

Another card that aids migrants is known as a *matricula*, a document issued

by Mexican consulates in many American cities. A *matricula* does not verify that a person is in the country legally, only that the holder is a native of Mexico. But it can be useful in renting an apartment or setting up a bank account, which give the trappings of legitimacy.

Luz Bueno, the Mexican consul in Orlando, said her office has issued more than 15,600 *matriculas* during the past year. "We do not ask" if people seeking the cards are in the country legally, Bueno said. "For us, it is not important."

Mickey Valdez, patrol agent in charge of the U.S. Border Patrol in Orlando, said he fields calls "daily" complaining about undocumented workers in the construction industry.

But he rarely follows up, he said, because his four agents and two support staffers are more concerned since the attacks of Sept. 11 with catching potentially violent criminals and terrorists. His office covers eight Central Florida counties.

On average, 42 illegal migrants are arrested and deported each month in Orange, Osceola, Seminole, Lake and Brevard counties, said Barbara Gonzalez, a spokeswoman for the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Usually, 20 are Mexicans.

Gonzalez would not say how or why her agency picks up the migrants or where they work.

"We don't discuss our investigative techniques," she said.

Bueno speculated that most deportations are the result of migrants being arrested for traffic violations or some other infraction, not because the authorities are targeting them.

Tirso Moreno, general coordinator of the Farmworkers Association of Florida Inc. in Apopka, estimates that as many as 30,000 migrants are working construction, mostly in residential. At least half are undocumented, he said, adding, "It could be a lot more."

Mexicans who have slipped into Central Florida contend the percentage of undocumented migrants building new houses is closer to 80 percent of the total work force.

Regardless of the number, there's little doubt they have become the backbone of Central Florida's home-building industry.

"These guys are working fools," Cuevas said. "They just go at it."



**Where migrants live.** Many of the buildings at this village in west Orange County do not offer air conditioning or heat, and extension cords are frequently used to operate appliances. Rents run about \$120 a week.

