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CRIME

Hundreds of California homes, buildings used plans drafted by 2 phony engineers, say authorities

By **Malia Zimmerman** 166 0 635
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Wilfrido Rodriguez, (l.), and Reuben Gutierrez, (r.), are suspected of using phony credentials and stolen software. (LA County Sheriff)

Hundreds of buildings -- from houses to strip malls -- could face the wrecking ball after California authorities unraveled a decade-long scam involving a pair of phony building engineers who used stolen software to craft bogus blueprints, officials told FoxNews.com.

Wilfrido Rodriguez and Ruben Gutierrez, allegedly posing as licensed professionals and using stolen software, drew up

engineering and architectural plans for homes, apartments, commercial properties and strip malls in at least 56 Southern California cities beginning in 2003, according to police. Neither had the training, expertise or credentials to vouch for the safety of the building plans, and authorities are only now grasping the scope of the problem.

“There has never been a case involving alleged engineering fraud of this magnitude,” Detective Rod Barton, of the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department’s Fraud and Cyber Crimes Bureau, told FoxNews.com. “Because this involves fraud related to structural engineering, we just don’t know if the houses are safe, unsafe or suitable for habitation.”

“There is never been a case involving alleged engineering fraud of this magnitude.”

- Det. Rod Barton, of the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department

The pair duped architects, builders and homeowners into believing they knew what they were doing, Barton said. Now, authorities are tasked with reviewing every building the pair worked on and determining if they are structurally sound, an issue made all the more urgent given the frequency of earthquakes in California.

“A significant concern is foundations,” said Panos Prevedouros, a professor and chair of Civil and Environmental Engineering at the University of Hawaii-Manoa. “Experienced drafters can work out safe designs for small masonry structures, but proper foundation design and specialized structural components required detailed engineering analysis.”

Before embarking on their alleged scam, the pair worked for the Rolling Hills Estates-based Palos Verdes Engineering Company. The company, which declined to comment for this story, told authorities it uncovered the alleged engineering fraud after a customer complained about an offer made by the men in April 2014.

Since that time, Barton and his bureau have been tracking down projects that involved the pair, and have been stunned and horrified at the number of buildings involved.

“Up until then, nobody had any knowledge that this fraud was occurring,” Barton told FoxNews.com. “We visited 56 cities from San Bernardino and Riverside to Ventura County. Our nexus were the initial files Palos Verdes Engineering identified, and then we segued into other projects. It was a lot of groundwork.”

Law enforcement authorities are working the Board of Professional Engineers, Land Surveyors and Geologists to determine the scope and risk posed by the alleged fraud.

“Evidence thus far uncovered leads us to believe there were hundreds of projects built on their fraudulent structural engineering,” said Tiffany Criswell, the board’s enforcement manager. “Evidence leads us to believe there are additional properties we have yet to identify.”

One challenge for law enforcement is that many local governments only keep design and engineering plans on file for six months.

“The Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department sent contact letters to homeowners, developers, and architectural designers whose properties have been identified as possibly being associated with fraudulent structural engineering,” Barton said. “Investigators believe additional properties associated with structural engineering fraud may exist, but have not yet been identified.”

The men have not been charged and are cooperating with the sheriffs’ detectives. While sheriffs didn’t say how much the men allegedly profited on the deal, they likely made at least \$2,000 to \$3,000 per project on potentially several hundred projects over 11 years, according to industry insiders.

Related Image



Police say the men are now cooperating, but the scope of the problem is massive.

The LA sheriff's white collar crime division will consider the case and whether to charge the men with a variety of crimes including civil engineering fraud, grand theft, theft of company identity, and forgery, LA sheriffs' detectives said.

Palos Verdes Engineering Company had no business relations with the men between 2003 and 2014, during the time the alleged fraud occurred, Barton said. The men allegedly stole software from the company, which was used to produce fraudulent engineering plans bearing its company name and logo, Barton said.

"Palos Verdes Engineering Company's civil engineer seal and forged signature was also used on structural engineering records to make the plans appear authentic, and as if they had been reviewed and approved by a licensed professional civil engineer."

Legitimate professional engineers must have a degree in civil engineering, pass several grueling exams and obtain five years of experience before they can sign off on design documents for implementation.

On the architectural side, the value of architectural licensure is "immeasurable," said Matt Tinder, spokesperson for The American Institute of Architects, in Washington, DC.

"Without it, the entire built environment could serve as a public safety hazard," Tinder said.

While there have been no glaring design flaws brought to the sheriff's attention, there could be a risk to the public, which could be heightened by a natural disaster such as an earthquake. The sheriff's department is advising homeowners who worked with Rodriguez and Gutierrez to contract the services of a civil engineer to go through the plans, examine their residence and determine if they are safe.

"We want to make sure people are safe," Barton said. "There is a reason all these requirements are in place. When the whole procedure is circumvented, something bad can happen."



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ownuptoit just now Did I miss it, there is no mention where these two are.

Like Reply



WhomeverYouWantMeToBe just now @ownuptoit They have a new contract - building jails and prisons.

Like Reply



JohnBlack1945 just now Poor little Blue State.

Like Reply



BigHair343 just now The test the architects have to pass in order to get their license is very difficult. Not only does it involve drawing a building from scratch while following rules and regulations, they also have to know the strength of different building materials they are using. One of the reasons most architects don't make a lot of money is because they have to purchase insurance in case something goes wrong. You have to wonder if these two scam artists were making more money than a real architect. Are these victims left with something they paid for but can't sell now?

Like Reply



my2cts just now Just ban them to the Middle East, they'd be considered structural engineers there. A little sand, mud, straw and glue, viola! A building!

Like Reply



DopeAndMange 1 minute ago They were just trying to bring California up(?) to Tijuana standards.

2 Like Reply



Coronadoagf11

1 minute ago

All of California is corrupt..... and what did these guys do wrong???

Like Reply



WhomeverYouWantMeToBe

just now

@Coronadoagf11 It amounts to practicing medicine without a license. People could die because of them.

Like Reply



Onfarrtikus

1 minute ago

For Sale: Home designed by Wilfrido Rodriguez and Ruben Gutierrez.....

1 Like Reply



BIIDS

1 minute ago

Another two Latinos making good.
Couldn't happen in a better place.
California, go f yourself.

1 Like Reply



JoseValasquez

2 minutes ago

So many here afraid of Brown people, please dont be afraid we will not hurt you, we are your friends.....Also these men were just making a living like everyone else. Mexicans are the future of this country and people will need to get used to it. Every candidate except 1 is for Amnesty and embraces us, Trump will fall just like the rest.....We are Americas Future! We are your friends and future relatives,and one day brothers!

Like Reply



JohnBlack1945

1 minute ago

@JoseValasquez We're all "brown" too... in the summertime.

Like Reply



Mycetoma

1 minute ago

@JoseValasquez I am not afraid of you.

Like Reply



JoseValasquez

just now

@Mycetoma @JoseValasquez Good its time we work as brothers and partners here in America!

1 Like Reply



TheBaldSpot

2 minutes ago

Democrats for bigger earthquakes supports these lost souls

1 Like Reply



Eyeseelt

3 minutes ago

We will all be living in hooches before this is over.

Like Reply



sourpickle

3 minutes ago

"Illegals are only here to take the jobs that Americans won't do."

Oh...wait a sec

5 Like Reply



Coronadoagf11

2 minutes ago

@sourpickle Stop it!!! Liberals HATE the truth.

3 Like Reply



JohnBlack1945

2 minutes ago

@sourpickle lol

Like Reply



JoseValasquez

1 minute ago

@sourpickle Dont be mad we have jobs too

Like Reply



HaveBikeWillTravel

4 minutes ago

Building permits for a private home in Kalifornia run \$30K. That's before you turn one shovel.

3 Like Reply



DopeAndMange

3 minutes ago

@HaveBikeWillTravel Apparently that doesn't mean they are actually checking anything for that money.

1 Like Reply



HaveBikeWillTravel

just now

@DopeAndMange @HaveBikeWillTravel Suppose to be checking plans and where it will be located. If they say no to issuing a building permit, could be out your 30K.

Like Reply



Coronadoagf11

4 minutes ago

California will demand Obama cut them a check for 100 Billion dollars since this is obviously Americas fault .

6 Like Reply

TheBaldSpot

3 minutes ago



Only if he can skim \$99 billion

2 Like Reply



Onfarrtikus

4 minutes ago

I can't see people bragging about their house being designed by Illegal Mexicans... I just can't see it...

1 Like Reply



JohnBlack1945

3 minutes ago

@Onfarrtikus But it's California... they're an enlightened people.

2 Like Reply



JCAIIman

5 minutes ago

Oreobama's "dreamers" bringin their A game.

3 Like Reply



leejames125

5 minutes ago

lol, burn them down, all of them

Like Reply



TheBaldSpot

5 minutes ago

Obama built this- got the certified plans from Jose...

2 Like Reply



JohnBlack1945

5 minutes ago

Makes me wonder where exactly were the building inspectors during all of this.

3 Like Reply



Liandie

5 minutes ago

@JohnBlack1945 enjoying their payoffs

3 Like Reply



DopeAndMange

6 minutes ago

They can spend their sentences building the wall. If they can demonstrate that they know how.

1 Like Reply



emperornorton

6 minutes ago

Just committing the frauds Americans won't....

2 Like Reply



Deportjumpingbeans

7 minutes ago

Trump and Sheriff Joe will take care of them

3 Like Reply



BillBillsomeoneelse

6 minutes ago

Obama will pardon them.

2 Like Reply



Richasarrus

7 minutes ago

Nothing in CA gets permitted and built without oversight. That oversight is usually a plan check process. The question of whether the buildings meet code is important. It is also HIGHLY important to know if these buildings plans underwent a plan checking process. Most permit applications have the plan check process and cost included.

If any of the buildings proves to be a problem, the governing building agency should also hold some liability. But that aside, these guys are criminals even if the buildings are found to be okay.

2 Like Reply



Onfartikus

2 minutes ago

@Richasarrus

Built by Illegal fraudulent mexican architects..... CHECK!

Like Reply



BillBillsomeoneelse

7 minutes ago

We have a President hiding his grades also, and his budget is on shaky ground...

We are chasing in debt...

1 Like Reply



Iraivala58

6 minutes ago

@BillBillsomeoneelse His budget is on shaky ground? You ground like in Kalifornia when a earth quake rolls in? That kind shaky.

Like Reply



DigitusImpudicus

7 minutes ago

they all fall down.

Like Reply



Onfartikus

7 minutes ago

Trump will have a field day.

2 Like Reply



JohnBlack1945

8 minutes ago

Where is the outcry that these are just a couple of hard working people

trying to feed their family?

1 Like Reply



Liandie

8 minutes ago

@JohnBlack1945 who cares? THEY ARE CRIMINALS!

3 Like Reply



Coronadoagf11

6 minutes ago

@Liandie @JohnBlack1945 No, they are hard working hispanics that came here because it was an act of love. They came here to better themselves. They should be given an award for using such ingenuity ,. God Bless them.

1 Like Reply



gomerownsus

8 minutes ago

@JohnBlack1945 It's an act of love.

3 Like Reply



DopeAndMange

7 minutes ago

@gomerownsus @JohnBlack1945 LOL

Like Reply



Onfarrtikus

8 minutes ago

Mexicans now flocking to Illegal Architecture

4 Like Reply



yourdogstinks

9 minutes ago

Most likely got the jobs to fulfill minority participation quotas

5 Like Reply



Liandie

8 minutes ago

@yourdogstinks kinda like obama huh? LOL

4 Like Reply



Liandie

9 minutes ago

will home owners have to foot the bill for the VERY EXPENSIVE audits??

Like Reply



DopeAndMange

10 minutes ago

There are two separate issues here.

- 1) Are the homes safe or will people have to tear their homes down?
- 2) Fraud, theft, forgery etc. Off to prison. These aren't civil suits where you have no harm, no foul. This is felony on parade.

2 Like Reply



AnoldPlumb

just now

@DopeAndMange

Meanwhile Hillary walks free.

Like Reply



gomerownsus

11 minutes ago

I've seen so many El Cheapo Mexican home repair jobs turn into multi-thousand dollar home rescue events. Don't let a Mexican touch your home, your lawn, etc., you'll regret it.

3 Like Reply



Onfarrtikus

9 minutes ago

@gomerownsus I did not think Californians had lawns anymore....Maybe this is why they moved to architecture?

1 Like Reply



Eyeseelt

11 minutes ago

Made in Mexico. Don't forget to put the light switches in the Shower.

2 Like Reply



Deportjumpingbeans

11 minutes ago

When will America wake up and get rid of these Mexicans who hurt the American people? Many many Mexicans you would never think are illegal actually are, being in law enforcement many years have opened my eyes to the corruption and the scams these illegal Mexicans do to steal from Americans . We need to get rid of them all no matter how long they have been here on this soil illegally. Round em up, and deport, have employer raids and show these Mexicans we mean business, enough of this pandering to Mexican thieves.....

3 Like Reply



michael15

5 minutes ago

@Deportjumpingbeans You are correct and the answer is....TRUMP 2016.

1 Like Reply



HarryTacos

11 minutes ago

Slum Dog Engineers

2 Like Reply

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