

By Amber Swal

There is a land where victimized women who call 911 for help get prosecuted. A land where Christians and people of other faiths are criminalized for helping the impoverished and isolated. A land where “productive citizens who pay into the system... get nothing out.”

This is “our own backyard... Central Florida,” described panelist Robin Lewy, co-director of the Rural Women’s Health Project, at a panel discussion titled “Unauthorized Immigration in the South: Beyond the Stereotypes” at St. Augustine Church on Tuesday.

The federal government under President Obama has stepped up its enforcement efforts, deporting almost 400,000 unauthorized immigrants last year, many of them in the South, according to panelist Dr. Philip Williams, director of the University of Florida Center of Latin American Studies and co-author of *Living “Illegal”: The Human Face of Unauthorized Immigration*.

In the past 10 years, the population of “unauthorized immigrants” in Alachua County has doubled to 20,000, Lewy said, and that’s the same with Marion and Levy counties.

The fear of increased immigration is based on concerns like unauthorized immigrants taking jobs from citizens and receiving the benefits of legal, tax-paying citizens, Williams said.

The panelists addressed these concerns with the following remarks:

Unauthorized immigrants do pay taxes and work hard to give back to their communities, Lewy said, yet there is often no way for them to earn amnesty, and they rarely receive benefits of legal immigrants.

A local unauthorized woman with leukemia had to fight stomach pains for six months while waiting for decent health care, despite having three children who are American citizens, Lewy said.

Students who grew up in the school system and were brought here by their parents when they were children did not decide to come illegally, yet they are forced to pay out-of-state tuition while their sometimes less accredited peers pay in-state tuition simply because their parents are citizens, she said.

In response to the fear of unauthorized immigrants taking American jobs, panelist Dr. Manuel Vasquez, professor of religion at the University of Florida and co-author of *Living 'Illegal,'* said that the workers are often doing jobs that Americans refuse to do.

Williams said Georgia reported a shortage of over 10,000 workers after passing legislation targeting unauthorized immigrants said they are coming to the United States because of demand for their labor.

Meanwhile, immigrants are being pulled over by police without having committed crimes or violations; it is happening simply because of how they look, Lewy said. She questioned why the police told a woman she was pulled over for driving without a license when in order to find that she didn't have a license, the police had to first pull her over without cause. She also questioned why it was

written in the police report that the woman was pulled over for not using her turn signal when she was told she was pulled over for not having a license.

This case is not alone. This happens in almost every agricultural community in the South, Lewy said.

According to an online report by John Christoffersen, Associated Press writer, that was published Tuesday, four police officers from East Haven, Conn. were arrested for denying Latino residents protection against unreasonable searches and seizures, using unreasonable force and concealing their weapons. The report said, “The U.S. Department of Justice said last month that the police department engaged in a pattern of discrimination against Latino residents.”

Vasquez said that unauthorized immigrants are “convenient targets” at whom people can easily channel their frustrations and fear. He said they justify this by saying that “‘illegal’ is not American.”

“The labels we apply to different immigrants have huge impacts on what services they have access to and how they’re viewed,” said Rev. David Ruchinski, pastor of St. Augustine Church.

“Labeling someone who comes to this country ‘illegal’ has important implications, exclusionary implications, separating them from the very human needs, the very human rights, which we would very naturally reach out to try to provide for those people.”

According to Vasquez, the goal of the discussion was to “use the book we published... to move the debate about unauthorized immigration beyond the labels

and stereotypes that have made very difficult the solution on the issue of unauthorized immigration.”

Congress funds 400,000 deportations each year, Williams said.

“Enforcement is only a show,” Vasquez said, “It is not a long-term solution.”

“We need to re-moralize the discussion. We’re creating an underclass of 10 million people that is going to come back to haunt us.”

The book has a tremendous amount of information, said Tom Rinkoski, director of religious education at the church. He said the discussion was part of a series of events the church has been doing on social justice and that the goal of the evening was to help people become as aware and as informed as possible.

“Along with voter education, our second mission is to educate the public about issues we’ve studied. We’re concerned that this is an issue that the federal government needs to be more involved in,” said Kathy Kidder, president of the League of Women Voters. The League of Women Voters co-sponsored the event. With only minutes left for discussion, audience member and President of the Latina Women’s League, Victoria Condor-Williams, stood up, turned to face the audience and said, “Please help us. We are not illegal. We are American.”