

Opinion: U.S. needs to rethink its priorities

By Fareed Zakaria, CNN

Something caught my eye the other day: Pat Robertson, the high priest of the religious right, had some startling things to say about drugs.

“I really believe we should treat marijuana the way we treat beverage alcohol,” Robertson said in a recent interview. “I’ve never used marijuana and I don’t intend to, but it’s just one of those things that I think. This war on drugs just hasn’t succeeded.”

The reason Robertson is for legalizing marijuana is that it has created a prison problem in America that is well beyond what most Americans imagine.

“It’s completely out of control,” Mr. Robertson said. “Prisons are being overcrowded with juvenile offenders having to do with drugs. And the penalties – the maximums – some of them could get 10 years for possession of a joint of marijuana. It makes no sense at all.”

He’s right. Here are the numbers: The total number of Americans under correctional supervision (prison, parole, etc.) is 7.1 million, more than the entire state of Massachusetts. Adam Gopnik writes in the New Yorker, “Overall, there are now more people under ‘correctional supervision’ in America...than were in the Gulag Archipelago under Stalin at its height.”

No other country comes even close to our rates of incarceration. We have 760 prisoners per 100,000 people. Most European countries have one seventh that number (per capita, so it’s adjusted for population). Even those on the high end

of the global spectrum – Brazil and Poland – have only a quarter the number we do.

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