



# Closing Mental Hospitals in America

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During the first half of the twentieth century, state mental hospitals were the main source of treatment and care for those with serious mental disorders in the United States (see W. Fisher, Geller, & Pandiani, 2009; Torrey, 1997). By the 1950s, there were more than a half million individuals in these hospitals. However, during the 1950s and 1960s, a number of events occurred that changed the way individuals with mental disorders were treated in the United States.

One significant event was the introduction of antipsychotic medication. Prior to this, individuals with serious mental disorders such as schizophrenia needed a high level of care and protection. With the introduction of medications that would help treat the disorder, it was possible for some of these individuals to live outside the hospital.

The Community Mental Health Act of 1963, signed into law by President John F. Kennedy, reflected the growing understanding that all but a small portion of those in mental hospitals could be treated in the community. The basic idea was that community mental health centers would offer a variety of programs to help those with mental illness.

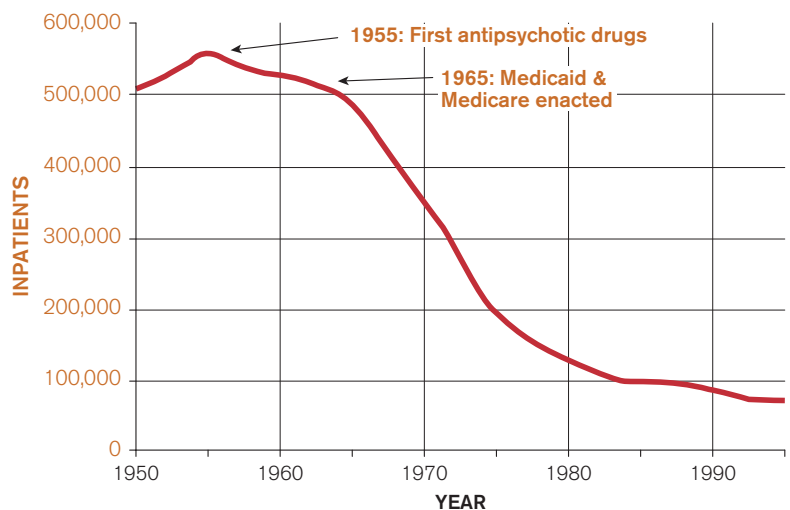
Although the population of the United States increased by 100 million between 1955 and 1994, the number of individuals in mental hospitals decreased from 550,239 to 71,619 (Torrey, 1997). The process of moving individuals from mental hospitals to the community was known as *deinstitutionalization*. Figure 1.12 shows this drastic change.

For some individuals with mental illness today who would have been placed in a hospital in the 1950s, their quality of life in the community is much better than it would have been. However, for many individuals, the ideals of the community mental health movement were never fulfilled. The community facilities for those with mental illness were never fully funded or were not even built. This left many individuals without the type of treatment they needed. Some have found themselves homeless and on the streets. Others, who were disruptive or who concerned the community, found themselves in jails and prisons with little mental health treatment and care. Similar deinstitutionalization occurred in the United Kingdom and other developed countries.

## FIGURE 1.12 When Did the Number of Individuals in Mental Hospitals in the United States Decrease?

Beginning in the 1960s, the number of individuals in mental hospitals began to decline.

Source: E. Fuller Torrey. *Out of the Shadows: Confronting America's Mental Illness*. New York, NY: Wiley, 1997.



**Thought Question:** Our history has shown us that neither institutionalizing nor deinstitutionalizing all individuals with serious mental disorders has been

effective. What do you think are some characteristics of a workable solution?