

# Deinstitutionalization: An American Tragedy

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Perhaps the most famous and heart-felt American mantra, a portion of a sonnet written by Emma Lazarus and inscribed on the Statue of Liberty, reads: Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me. When Lazarus wrote this poem, she certainly was picturing the country that our forefathers set to establish, with the ambitions, morals, principles, and values that the land of the free was founded on centuries ago. She was not imagining how far we would stray from that path over the years. As a country, we do not do nearly enough in the name of our indigent, our homeless, or our mentally ill. In fact, we have moved drastically in the opposite direction, especially since the mid-1950s. While we may still offer a safe haven for political refugees, and represent a beacon of hope for impoverished immigrants, our own tired, hungry, poor, homeless, and severely mentally ill citizens have been all but forgotten. If there has ever existed an American public policy that deserved, and needed immediate retraction, or at the very least extreme reformation, it is the 1955 policy that we have affectionately named deinstitutionalization. A gross injustice to the American people, this policy is largely responsible for the vast and sudden increases in our homeless population, lack of treatment options and availability to mentally ill persons, as well as the massive inundation of mentally ill and mentally handicap people in our correctional institutions and homeless populations. What was once

considered a compassionate policy change, and a landmark in human rights, is now viewed as the greatest failed American social experiment of all t..... middle of paper .....ic Policy Studies, 13(1). Retrieved from <http://www.fed-soc.org/publications/detail/madness-deinstitutionalization-murder> Fuller, E.F. (1997). Deinstitutionalization: A Psychiatric "Titanic." Out of the Shadows: Confronting America's Mental Illness Crisis (Chapters 1,3 & Appendix). John Wiley & Sons: New York, NY. Retrieved from <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/asylums/special/excerpt.html> National Coalition for the Homeless. (2006, June). NCH Fact Sheet #5: Mental Illness and Homelessness. Washington, DC: (n.a.). Retrieved from [http://www.nationalhomeless.org/publications/facts/Mental\\_Illness.pdf](http://www.nationalhomeless.org/publications/facts/Mental_Illness.pdf) Treatment Advocacy Center. (2011). Eliminating Barriers to the Treatment of Mental Illness: Re-institutionalization?. Arlington, VA: (n.a.). Retrieved from [http://www.treatmentadvocacycenter.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=741&Itemid=97](http://www.treatmentadvocacycenter.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=741&Itemid=97)

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