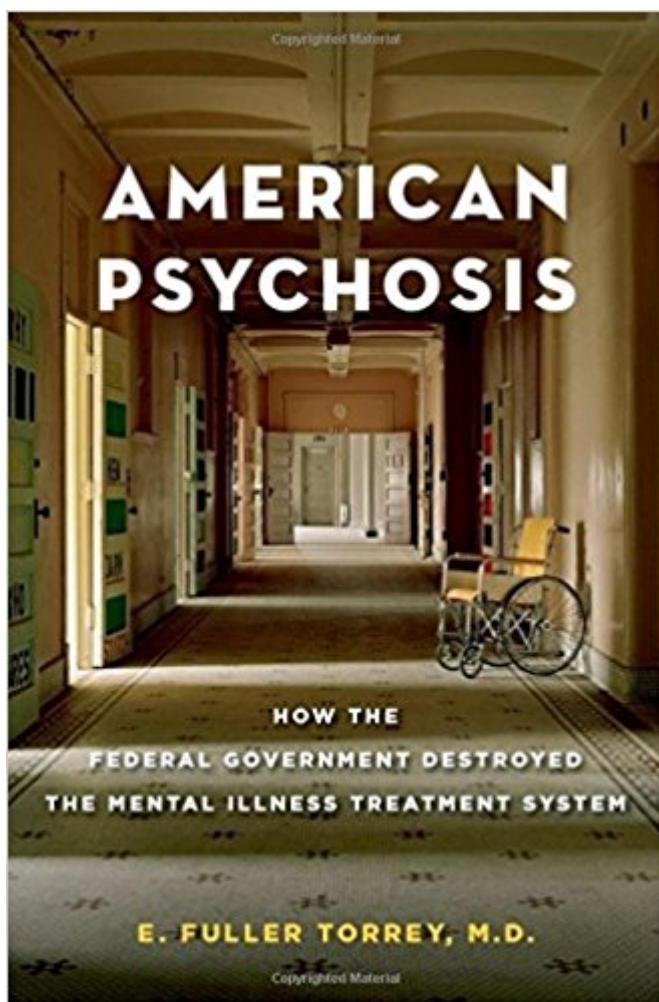


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# American Psychosis: How The Federal Government Destroyed The Mental Illness Treatment System



## Synopsis

In 1963, President John F. Kennedy delivered an historic speech on mental illness and retardation. He described sweeping new programs to replace "the shabby treatment of the many millions of the mentally disabled in custodial institutions" with treatment in community mental health centers. This movement, later referred to as "deinstitutionalization," continues to impact mental health care. Though he never publicly acknowledged it, the program was a tribute to Kennedy's sister Rosemary, who was born mildly retarded and developed a schizophrenia-like illness. Terrified she'd become pregnant, Joseph Kennedy arranged for his daughter to receive a lobotomy, which was a disaster and left her severely retarded. Fifty years after Kennedy's speech, E. Fuller Torrey's book provides an inside perspective on the birth of the federal mental health program. On staff at the National Institute of Mental Health when the program was being developed and implemented, Torrey draws on his own first-hand account of the creation and launch of the program, extensive research, one-on-one interviews with people involved, and recently unearthed audiotapes of interviews with major figures involved in the legislation. As such, this book provides historical material previously unavailable to the public. Torrey examines the Kennedys' involvement in the policy, the role of major players, the responsibility of the state versus the federal government in caring for the mentally ill, the political maneuverings required to pass the legislation, and how closing institutions resulted not in better care - as was the aim - but in underfunded programs, neglect, and higher rates of community violence. Many now wonder why public mental illness services are so ineffective. At least one-third of the homeless are seriously mentally ill, jails and prisons are grossly overcrowded, largely because the seriously mentally ill constitute 20 percent of prisoners, and public facilities are overrun by untreated individuals. As Torrey argues, it is imperative to understand how we got here in order to move forward towards providing better care for the most vulnerable.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"For a few days in September--after a psychotic gunman killed 12 people in Washington's Navy Yard--we were forced to ask ourselves, yet again, how we treat the seriously mentally ill in America and whether we need to rethink our policies and assumptions. No one is better equipped to address those questions than E. Fuller Torrey." --Sally Satel, Wall Street Journal

"This is a powerful book on how to prevent the high profile tragedies that galvanize national attention, and the thousands of other tragedies that pass under the radar. I highly recommend it to all advocates and policymakers who care about mental illness." --Huffington Post

"This wise and unflinching book is an object lesson in good intentions gone awry on a grand scale. It should be widely read." --New York Times

"An important book by a refreshingly candid author who shares his vast knowledge in the interests of the needy." --Kirkus Reviews, starred review

"Torrey is the conscience of the country and its most articulate spokesperson when it comes to public mental health care. His latest installment, American Psychosis, is a scathing analysis of the abject failure of U.S. mental health care policy written in his usual lucid and compelling style. Torrey is the Dorthea Dix of our time." -- Jeffrey A. Lieberman, MD, President Elect, American Psychiatric Association; Lawrence C. Kolb Professor and Chairman of Psychiatry, Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons; and Director, New York State Psychiatric Institute

"The first time I heard Torrey speak at a meeting of psychiatrists I was so offended I got up and left. Five years later I realized that everything he had said was true. This book will, I believe, offend many people; hopefully it will take them less time to recognize the truth of what Torrey has written." -- Alan A. Stone, MD, Former President of the American Psychiatric Association, Touroff-Glueck Professor of Law and Psychiatry in the Faculty of Law and the Faculty of Medicine, Harvard University

"Torrey's superb new book is a devastating indictment of America's mental health 'system,' a story of good intentions gone disastrously awry. Torrey combines a deep professional knowledge of severe mental illness with an unparalleled understanding of the politics and policy of mental health. His lively writing weaves together powerful and poignant examples of the problem with hard-headed and yet compassionate solutions to one of America's greatest public policy tragedies." -- Stuart M. Butler, PhD, Distinguished Fellow and Director, Center for Policy

Innovation, The Heritage Foundation "With persuasive facts and gripping, tragic examples, Torrey documents what state psychiatric hospitals, community mental health centers, and jails have in common: millions of seriously mentally ill people treated inhumanely and inadequately, causing deterioration in the care of the most vulnerable. He examines the lessons learned from mental illness service programs over the past 50 years and concludes that we should greatly expand the best, such as proven programs in Wisconsin and New York City, and eliminate the worst, such as for-profit mental illness providers like nursing and board and care homes. American Psychosis is an unprecedented, invaluable elaboration of how to alter a national tragedy." -- Sidney M. Wolfe, MD, Public Citizen Health Research Group, Co-author of Worst Pills, Best Pills, and Editor, WorstPills.org "Vintage Torrey: Comprehensive, deep, and thoughtful; biting and to the point; yet hopeful and hoping for change." -- John A. Talbott, MD, Professor of Psychiatry, University of Maryland School of Medicine "The author successfully weaves in political, social, and medical influences of the time, permitting readers to comprehend the challenges faced during this period. It is clear the author has a passion for this subject, and he provides solid conclusions that should leave readers wondering when, if not now, is the appropriate time to overhaul the system once again." -Steven T. Herron, MD, Doody's Health Sciences Book Review

E. Fuller Torrey is Executive Director of the Stanley Medical Research Institute in Chevy Chase, MD, founder of the Treatment Advocacy Center, and Professor of Psychiatry at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences.

American Psychosis is a devastating but important critique of the American Mental Illness system. The Community Mental Health Center movement began in 1963 with a law signed by John F. Kennedy. Efforts to implement the law failed to achieve the promise of the overly ambitious law. This book goes into detail about the failures. There was a good faith effort by many mental health professionals at the time but funding was stopped by Congress in the early 1980s and early achievements were lost to history. The author offers explanations on how the mentally ill came to inhabit our local and state prisons once the state hospitals gladly shut their doors. It speaks to the terrible toll our most vulnerable citizens and their families have been paying for half a century of neglect by the rest of us. This book spell out ways that can be considered in order to address the current crisis of the homeless mentally ill. It lays down the basis for making changes in a system that has grown intolerable not only for the people who are ill but for the rest of the country that is beginning to look for ways to cope with it.

This important book, hopefully, will be read by those in relevant positions of influence to learn of the sorry state of the treatment of those with serious mental illness in the United States, and move them to action. It is written by a psychiatrist who has dedicated a substantial portion of his career addressing this issue. It begins as a detailed chronicle of how the federal government transformed flawed institutional care into an outpatient system which in the end became dysfunctional and chaotic, a system, "without eyes or a brain," that left many of those with serious mental illness relegated to a life of unbelievable squalor and neglect. Although deinstitutionalization had been slowly evolving for several years, the process began in earnest in 1963, during the Kennedy administration, with the enactment of federal mental health legislation (supported by the President motivated by a covered up of a family tragedy). This law promoted the deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill and provided, instead, for the establishment of outpatient mental health clinics throughout the country. The legislation was fatally flawed from the beginning by the notion that mental illness was caused by environmental factors, not biological ones, the failure to provide for continuity of treatment for those with serious mental illness, and providing financial incentives that had little to do with the treatment of mental illness. These unintended incentives encouraged a diaspora of the mentally ill into custodial care in unregulated for profit board and care facilities and nursing homes (many with appalling conditions), into our streets as homeless, and into our prisons. Contacts with law enforcement frequently erupt into violence with mentally ill being killed by policemen. Conversely It has been well established that at least 10% of the homicides in the United States are committed by the seriously mentally ill driven by paranoid delusions and hallucinations. The author cites numerous examples of such preventable killings. Factors that impede appropriate treatment of the seriously mentally ill are discussed, among others: lack of leadership, lack of accountability, lack of understanding of serious mental illness, difficulties related to involuntary commitment for treatment, lack of appropriate number of hospital beds, and inappropriate financing. Finally, the author outlines those aspects of the failed system that will be essential to address and some suggestions are offered of how to begin the process of reform. After 50 years of neglect and given the degree of dysfunction in the system substantial efforts to achieve its rehabilitation will be long and arduous.

I read both American Psychosis and The Insanity Offense Together. After going through absolute hell and losing my mother in law to her mental illness (in a murder suicide) it's at least some relief to know that we tried our best in the terrible mental health system that exists in the USA. Torrey's

books describe the history of how this happened in detail, offer possible solutions as well as chronicling the death toll from this dysfunctional and broken system that results in homelessness, death and broken families every day.

Walks on the Margins, a Story of Bipolar Illness I've been talking and writing about our broken mental health care system and the need for change since shortly after our son was diagnosed with mental illness in 1999 and we began battling to find good treatment in that "system." It's been well over a decade now, yet nothing has changed. That we dare to call mental health care a "system" is laughable. After all "system" implies organization of services, coordination of care, and oversight. In too many cases, there are no services at all. And instead of care, there is only chaos. I've never understood how this could have happened--how we could be failing the mentally ill among us so completely. E Fuller Torrey, in his recently released book, American Psychosis, has made it painfully clear. With uncompromising and fierce analysis and insight, he has explained how things went so wrong after JFK signed the community mental health act in 1963. The motivation for legislation was laudable, the outcome, however, was a disaster. Fifty years since, the mental health care system is in shambles. Mental health hospitals had already begun closing in the 50's and continued to do for many reasons--exposure of the horrible conditions and lack of treatment in some, new medications that brought the worst symptoms under control, changes in Medicare and Medicaid that disallowed coverage for psychiatric hospital care, lawsuits and changes in commitment criteria, and the feeling that there were better ways to treat those who live with mental illness. With the closings and the new law came a hopeful paradigm- community mental health centers would provide care in outpatient settings where those with mental illness could reengage as members of their families and communities. Why was the plan such a failure? The legislation, says Torrey was fatally flawed. "It encouraged the closing of state mental hospitals without any realistic plan regarding what would happen to the discharged patients, especially those who refused to take medication they needed to remain well. It included no plan for the future funding of mental health centers. It focused resources on prevention when nobody understood enough about mental illnesses to know how to prevent them. And by bypassing the states, it guaranteed that future services would not be coordinated." The failure of the community mental health care program was due to more than just poor planning and lack of funding. For me, the most troubling was the changing philosophy of those who were charged with leading the program. As plans were being formulated, their focus shifted from the care for those with severe mental illness to one of prevention, which in turn became a movement to address our social and cultural ills in order to promote mental health. Admirable perhaps, but such grandiose

notions were far beyond the scope of community mental health centers that were supposed to serve those with mental illness. The change in thinking, Torrey says, altered the essential function of community treatment. Many of those who were released from hospitals were severely ill, didn't have family support, had chronic long-term needs, and had no place to go. Says Torrey, "Our failure to protect such mentally ill people by insuring they receive treatment is a major miscarriage of our mental health care system and a blot on our claims to be civilized." So many ended up homeless and in jail and the travesty continues to this day. The result? The largest mental health providers in the nation are our prisons and jails: Cook County in Illinois, Los Angeles County, and Rikers Island in New York among them. The complete failure of mental health care in this country is a sad commentary on how personal biases and ambitions, wrong headedness, and political aspirations can shape policy and impact people in such devastating ways. In the last chapter Torrey acknowledges that change does not come easily. Progress is impeded by the lack of understanding of serious mental illness, failure to understand the magnitude of the problem, economic and political interests, and the lack of leadership. However, "the fact that we know what to do to correct the existing mental illness disaster is the good news," he says. He explains how we can incorporate what we've learned into successful programs. When we know how and why the system fails and when we look at what successful treatment looks like, as Torrey does, then we can begin to work to achieve it. Torrey concludes his book with a 1947 quote from *Out of Sight, Out of Mind* by Frank Wright: "Throughout history the problem of the mentally ill has been dodged. We have continually avoided mentally ill patients--we have segregated them, ostracized them, turned our back on them, tried to forget about them. We have allowed intolerable conditions to exist for the mentally ill through our ignorance and indifference. We can no longer afford to ignore their needs, to turn a deaf ear to their calls for help. We must come face to face with the facts." "Isn't it time to finally do so?" Torrey asks. I urge anyone who is concerned about the current state of mental health care to read this book. And I thank Dr. Torrey for writing it.

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