

Dominic Sisti

Psychiatric Institutions Are a Necessity

Dominic Sisti is the director of the [ScattergoodEthics](#) Program and assistant professor of medical ethics at the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania. He is on [Twitter](#) (@domsisti).

www.nytimes.com/ Updated May 9, 2016, 11:01 PM

Behind the bars of prisons and jails in the United States exists a shadow mental health care system where nearly half a million inmates have a serious mental illness like schizophrenia. In hospitals, severely mentally ill patients languish for months in acute care units, which are designed to stabilize patients, not to help their long-term recovery.

High quality, ethically administered psychiatric asylums would provide the seriously mentally ill with a place to stabilize and recover.

To give these people the care they deserve, we need to [bring back](#) psychiatric asylums. Not the dismal institutions that were shuttered in the past, or settings of gothic fiction, but asylums based on the true meaning of the word: places of sanctuary and safety for vulnerable people. The current system too often fails to protect and care for individuals who have serious mental illness in the appropriate place and at the appropriate time.

Mental health treatment should be provided in a seamless continuum that ranges from outpatient care, to community services and supportive housing, to inpatient medical care. But the system is so utterly disjointed, uncoordinated and poorly funded, that those who need help, instead end up in jails and prisons, or warehoused in nursing homes and other group housing facilities.

The Supreme Court was right to have ruled in [the 1999 Olmstead decision](#) that individuals with physical or mental disabilities should be provided treatment in the least restrictive setting. But the court also warned that people who need more support, in therapeutic institutional settings, should continue to receive it.

The few state hospitals that remain, though, have months-long wait lists, and private psychiatric facilities cost tens of thousands of dollars per month. The dramatic decline in psychiatric beds has been [well documented](#).

In any other branch of medicine, such a dearth of services would stoke public outrage. Yet in mental health care, it is routine for sick individuals to cycle through the same emergency rooms weekly — or find themselves in jails and prisons — only to be sent on their way with a blister pack containing a week's worth of medication before they deteriorate again.

High quality, ethically administered psychiatric asylums would provide the seriously mentally ill with a place to stabilize and recover; they are a necessary part of a comprehensive mental health care system. In contrast to those of the past, [modern asylums](#) would be settings that restore hope, support recovery and provide an array of treatments. Their quality and costs should be fully transparent and they should be integrated into the broader health care system, perhaps as a part of an [accountable care organization](#).

It is [challenging to estimate](#) the cost of long-term psychiatric care. [New or modernized facilities](#) would cost several hundred millions of dollars. But when public dollars are now being spent to accommodate mentally ill people inside prisons, isn't there a strong moral case to instead invest in places to care for our society's most vulnerable people the right way?