The Tragic History of the Community Mental Health Act

A Review of

*American Psychosis: How the Federal Government Destroyed the Mental Illness Treatment System*

by E. Fuller Torrey


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Reviewed by

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E. Fuller Torrey is well known for his impassioned attacks on the Community Mental Health Act of 1963 and its aftermath. As he says in the preface to *American Psychosis: How the Federal Government Destroyed the Mental Illness Treatment System*, “I do not pretend to be a dispassionate observer” (p. ix). Although that is certainly true, even Torrey’s critics agree that the “deinstitutionalization” movement was flawed and that many community mental health centers, especially in their early decades, treated ever larger numbers of the so-called worried well but failed to meet the needs of those with chronic disorders.

Because Torrey worked for the National Institute of Mental Health between 1970 and 1976, he has an insider’s view of the events he chronicles. He knows many of those who helped to write and then to implement the 1963 legislation. They were “well-meaning professionals,” he writes, who were “complicit” in the ensuing disaster (p. ix).

This is far from Torrey’s first account of these events. Hence, potential readers might well ask what *American Psychosis* adds to the arguments offered in earlier books and articles. In this book, Torrey promises to offer new insights into the political maneuvering that led to the development of a federal mental health program in the 1960s.

The resulting story is not the product of a professional historian (something Torrey does not claim to be). He often uses evidence without the skeptical care that scholars demand. Typical here is his characterization of Henry Gorman, a mental health lobbyist who worked for Mary Lasker, as a “socialist” (p. 29) based on a 1952 FBI report. Historians of the McCarthy era would wince.

Torrey’s use of interviews and print documents, many generated by those whose story he wants to tell, is also uncritical. For example, in recounting the sad life of Rosemary Kennedy and its impact on her siblings, especially John and Eunice, he relies heavily on well-known secondary materials, many written by journalists close to the Kennedy family.
Torrey’s use of oral history is equally naive. With commendable energy, he has collected a large number of interviews with key actors in the community mental health movement. Some of these interviews were conducted in the 1960s and 1970s; others were done by Torrey himself in the past few years. He is right to argue that the oral materials offer rich insights into midcentury mental health politics. However, they need to be used with care. There are issues related to interviewer and retrospective biases that he does not address. Hence, those in search of a scholarly history of community mental health might better turn to the many books and articles of Gerald Grob, on which Torrey himself relies (e.g., Grob, 1991).

In the last two chapters of American Psychosis, Torrey returns to more familiar ground: the disastrous failure of the American government in the late 20th and early 21st centuries to meet the needs of those with serious long-term mental illnesses. His fury over what happened (and continues to happen) to those who ended up on the streets or in poorly supervised private facilities is powerful.

In his last chapter, Torrey offers a number of suggestions intended to solve or at least mitigate the problems that so incense him. Some seem like common sense but merit reiteration. More beds in public psychiatric hospitals are needed. (Unfortunately, he does not address the issue of who would get to decide the number of new spaces and or how they would be funded.) Community mental health programs need to offer more continuity of care. The experiments with the use of for-profit facilities to deliver public care have been disastrous and should be terminated. He very much likes assertive community treatment (ACT) programs. By coordinating the clinical, vocational, housing, and social needs of patients, Torrey notes, ACT teams have increased medication compliance and reduced rehospitalizations—albeit without the outpatient commitment procedures that he so strongly favors.

Other suggestions are more controversial. They also are not new. For example, Torrey once again argues that involuntary civil commitment laws should be changed to make it easier for the state to force into treatment those who pose a risk to themselves or their communities. He calls for criminal justice professionals to be granted easier access to medical records, which, he argues, will help the police to protect the general public from the sickest and most dangerous of the mentally ill. He rejects the notion that federal oversight of mental health care can ever be viable and offers many harsh criticisms of the Medicaid program.

Somewhat surprisingly, Torrey seldom refers to the large body of social science literature on the issues of so much interest to him beyond his discussion of ACT. For example, like others, he is very concerned about the so-called criminalization of mental illness. Yet, perhaps because he is not a social scientist, he does not mention the findings of researchers such as Linda Teplin (e.g., Teplin & Pruett, 1992). Such work would complicate and perhaps change Torrey’s recommendations related to the criminal justice system. Henry Steadman and others have offered a very different take on dangerousness and mental illness; using large data sets, they have argued that most of the long-term mentally ill, including those who are actively psychotic, are not a risk to others (Monahan & Steadman, 1994). Although Torrey might well agree with the specifics of their arguments, his rhetoric often suggests the opposite. He uses words like dangerous and risk without acknowledging, at least in this book, the complexities of operationalizing these terms in public spheres.
Torrey has been a passionate critic of American mental illness policies for more than half a century. If this book generates yet more outrage, it merits widespread distribution. However, insofar as he generates fear and offers overly simple solutions to the problems that so disturb him, his recommendations may have undesirable, albeit unintended, consequences for the very people whom he wants to help.

References


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