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'Women and asylums'

The 19th c. England saw a massive expansion of mental asylums. After the Lunacy Act 1845 and the County Asylums Act 1845, each county was required to have at least one asylum. The increasing trend in mental illness patients far outpaced that in the total population thereafter.

By compiling a large number of statistical sources, including the population censuses and Ancestry.com, I create the first systematic dataset on mental asylums in the 19th c. England. I use it to examine the relationship between women and asylums, among other lines of inquiries. In addition, I glean information from over 2,000 reports on mental asylums, the National Archives as well as bills and acts available from the Proquest Central. To my knowledge, this is the first quantitative, systematic study on this topic.

I begin the paper by reviewing a few key concepts regarding mental illness and by carefully documenting the historical context of the Lunacy Act 1845. In particular, I survey the economic conditions and political discourse near the point that the Lunacy Act was passed. Subsequently, a descriptive analysis is provided on the size and composition of mental asylum population over time, before a closer look is taken at women in the asylums specifically.

In popular culture, women and mental asylums are closely related to each other. I confirm this impression in my data. I then ask the question of why more women than men were kept in the asylums. Using regional variation, I uncover the main correlates of the share of the female asylum population.

How did asylums affect women? Taking advantage of individual-level census data, I document benchmark characteristics of women admitted to the asylums, and examine the impact of stays in the asylums on a range of outcomes for them.

The last part of the paper deals with the long-run consequences of the wave of asylums in 19th c. England.