

Involuntary Celibates: Background for Practitioners

Organization for the
Prevention of Violence

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organization for
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Summary

Ideology

- The internet has facilitated the coalescence of a new movement inspired by violent misogyny. These individuals refer to themselves as involuntarily celibate, or 'incels'.
- Incels are predominantly young men who believe that their physical appearance coupled with women's liberation and feminism has impeded them from forming physical relationships with women. From this grievance, they have developed an ideology that encompasses anti-feminism, misogyny, nihilism, and self-abasement.

Violence and Notable Incidents

- Since 2009, individuals linked to the movement have been involved in at least 13 reported attacks in North America. In Canada, there have been four incidents resulting in death since 2015: three in Ontario and one in Alberta.
- There is some evidence that these individuals have a propensity for choosing targets where women are found to congregate, such as: yoga studios, women's fitness classes and erotic massage parlors. If the pace of attacks escalates, improving security at these places warrants consideration. When attacks occur in more public spaces, Incel attackers still tend to specifically target women or romantic couples. Like many other violent extremists, Incel attackers tend to choose 'low-tech' and low-cost modes of attacks: shootings, stabbings and vehicular rammings.

Demographics and Providing Support

- Individuals who associate with the Incel movement appear more likely than the general population to self-report anxiety, depression and other mood disorders.
- There are established in-group norms against seeking psychosocial support. Overcoming these barriers and making support more accessible will be key to preventing further acts of violence.
- While the violent fringe of the Incel movement is being recognized as a threat, it is important to acknowledge the majority of Incels are not violent and may be at a higher risk of self-harm than the general population.

Key Tenets of the Ideology

The Incel movement identifies cultural and generational change as the root of their problems. Incels believe social developments like feminism, shifting gender roles and mass media have created unacceptable standards around women's autonomy and ability to select their own sexual partners. These social developments impede the (re)establishment of a desired patriarchal society for the Incels, one in which women are obedient and sexually accessible. Incels have ordered these grievances and beliefs through the construction of an ideology, particularly, alternative interpretation of history. A lack of sexual intimacy is perceived as the greatest, although not sole, injustice the community faces.

There are dozens of labels and classifications employed within the various elements of the Incel community. Men and women are placed in categories, and certain groups are subject to the greatest and most violent criticism. Women are usually categorized according to their specific physical and mental attributes. For example, '**Stacys**' are said to be physically attractive women who are unattainable by most males. '**Chads**' are characterized as good looking, fit males who have ready sexual access to women. Incels express anger, resentment and feelings of inadequacy towards 'Chads' whom they see as traditionally "masculine" men. Binary thinking like this feeds into their sensitivity to rejection and failure.

In their view, rejection will always be present and is aggravated by societal gender norms around masculinity and sexual experiences. Incels perceive themselves as the weaker, submissive counterpart to the hyper-masculine "Chad". Failure to experience an intimate relationship deepens their sense of inferiority and further accelerates their resentment of the "out-group" and a sense of comradery with other Incels. This binary thinking comes to a crisis point during an act of violence. Violently targeting women and those they view as opponents absolves Incels of their perceived weaknesses. It is ultimately an assertion of dominance and a conclusive rejection of their inferiority. Violence and intimidation places them in a position of power over others.

There is overlap between Incels and other groups' active online including **Men's Rights Advocates** (MRAs), the more extreme **Men Going Their Own Way** (MGTOWs), and the **alt-right**. However, Incels' entrenched opinions and rhetoric towards men who are not Incels (i.e., Chads) distinguishes them from other MRAs or MGTOWs who do not define themselves in opposition to other men. Moreover, MRAs tend to emulate and project stereotypically masculine traits (such as dominance, strength, and emotional repression) as the reasoning behind their right to control women. As mentioned, opposed to MRAs and MGTOWs, Incels criticize society's preference towards traditional masculine stereotypes. These different groups of individuals are likely to present differently in a clinical setting.

Demographics and Characteristics

Initial media reporting on Incels suggested that Incels were overwhelmingly white, and implicitly linked the movement to contemporary manifestations of the violent far-right. At a high level, there are obvious reasons to suspect overlap between the groups: anti-feminist and misogynistic narratives feature prominently in far-right propaganda. However, this is more or less true of all extremist movements.

Subsequent analyses have added more nuance and suggested that while ethnicity and race are frequently discussed topics on the forum, the tone of the discussions focused more on "which race has more Incels and which race has more (dis)loyal women" (Jacki et. al, 2015, 11). One of the larger online Incel forums, *incels.co* also conducts semi-regular, self-reported polling of its members that seems to confirm this finding. A March 2020 poll (n=670) they conducted found that only 54.8 percent of the respondents were white; an earlier October 2019 poll that number was 56.1 percent (n=547).

The March 2020 data found that more than 64 percent of users were under the age of 25 and 100% of its users identified as male. While there are female Incels (femcels), they are a small minority of the overall community. 74.5 percent of users indicated that they were either working or studying, while 24 percent identified as not being employed, educated or in training (**NEET**).

The same series of polls found that Incels reported very high levels of negative mental health. In the 2020 poll, 70.8 percent reported being bullied as a child, 74.1 percent of respondents said they "suffer from long-lasting anxiety, stress or emotional distress", 88 percent reported they were unhappy and 77.2 percent were not optimistic about the future. 28.5 percent self-reported that they were on the autism spectrum. In the October 2019 poll, 67.5 percent said they had "seriously considered suicide".

Taken together, these data suggest that Incels constitute a community with an apparent set of needs who can benefit from the support of human service and mental health practitioners.

Definitional Challenges and Policy Responses

Policymakers and law enforcement in Canada have responded to the emerging threat posed by the small, violent fringe of the Incel movement. For example, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service's (CSIS) 2019 Public Report lists gender-driven violence as a form of ideologically-motivated violent extremism. The report defined it as "the hatred of those of a different gender and or sexual orientation which can lead to violent misogyny." This represented a significant shift in CSIS' conception of the ideologies driving violent extremism.

Similarly, Public Safety Canada's Canada Centre for Community Engagement and Prevention of Violence partnered with Moonshot CVE to develop innovative online tools designed to identify and offer support to Canadian Incels.

The first major output of Moonshot's project is a very helpful primer on the language and tropes used by Incels. It can be found here: <http://moonshotcve.com/incels-symbols-and-terminology/>

There has been some debate in the media about the suitability of the label 'terrorism' being applied to Incel-linked acts of violence. This issue surfaced after a 17-year old was charged with terrorism offenses in the aftermath of a stabbing in Toronto in February 2020.

Terrorism as defined in the Criminal Code of Canada has two essential elements. It must be carried out "in whole or in part for a political, religious or ideological purpose, objective or cause" with the intention of "intimidating the public, or a segment of the public, with regard to its security".

While violent Incels may lack the clearly articulated worldview of white supremacists, Al-Qaeda, or Daesh, their individual grievances have clearly been subsumed within a broader ideological understanding of society that seeks to bring about systemic change.

The public and targeted nature of Incel-linked attacks can be differentiated from superficially similar intimate partner violence (IPV). Vehicular attacks targeting women, a mass shooting at a women's aerobic class and a targeted stabbing of women sex workers are all clearly intended to create fear within an identifiable segment of the public, whereas IPV usually lacks an intended broader effect.

Suggestions for Practitioners

1

Work to understand the person's anxiety, depression or other mental health issues, and acknowledge the way in which their grievances and frustrations compound these problems without validating their belief system. Validating their issues makes it easier to engage and build a relationship, but sympathizing with their beliefs in an effort to engage gives them control and inevitably will fit their narrative of society being against them and betraying them once confronted with their beliefs and actions.

2

Support clients in building healthy connections with others while appreciating the underlying factors that may have led someone to subscribe to Incel beliefs. People who experience chronic or toxic trauma often have an intense fear of appropriately intimate relationships. The threat of further rejection and abandonment can be overwhelming. Incels may claim to seek intimacy but their beliefs imply dominance rather than intimacy. Without support and connections to healthy people, it is not likely people in such situations will take the risk of making connections on a deeper level. However, helping clients form intimate relationships (sexual or non-sexual) can be an important step in negating this desire for dominance.

3

Work to explore their perception of themselves. It is likely there are feelings of inadequacy and loneliness that they are projecting onto others, blaming women in particular. This could be a segue into underlying trauma. Rejection and abandonment are very significant themes and can rationalize/justify the developing belief system with the Incel movement.

4

If working with clients on the autism spectrum, understand that they may struggle with social competency and therefore may be vulnerable to manipulation online. This can be made worse if they do not have a strong positive social network themselves. These individuals' challenges with social interaction can become subsumed with the Incel narrative that attributes these challenges to society in general, and women in particular. That said, it is important to remember that people on the autism spectrum are not a homogeneous group, and while a high number of Incels self-identify as being on the spectrum, the ways in which their beliefs interact with their condition can be highly individualized.

5

Self-harm is often a way to cope with anxiety and, in the moment, brings instant gratification, allowing the person to feel they have control over at least one aspect of their life at that moment. Self-harm is often a very personal thing, and when it becomes known it likely has been going on for some time already. It is important to de-stigmatize self-harm while also determining where the client is in regard to the behavior (their stage of change), including the behaviors purpose (coping, self-punishment, etc). For clients open to clinical intervention, Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) has shown effectiveness with addressing self-harm as well as challenging distortions in thinking (Keith et. al, 2016)

6

A strengths based approach can be utilized to help clients focus on their positive qualities, abilities, and strengths. Support clients in engaging in offline, healthy self-improvement activities that naturally align with their own goals and strengths. Encouraging the development of natural community connections may also serve to create feelings of acceptance and self-worth outside of the Incel ideology and community.

7

Within the Incel community, there are a number of voices and forums that speak out against violence and instead encourage self-improvement (*maxxing*) and peer support (this moderate approach is often referred to as 'taking the *purplepill*'). For clients who are already heavily involved within more violent online Incel communities, encouraging them to explore these alternative online spaces may be a helpful *first step* away from violence.

While complete disengagement from the Incel community and inclusion in more pro-social groups is a meaningful long-term goal, short-term progress may be partially dependent on maintaining some semblance of the social support individuals receive from these otherwise toxic environments.

This recommendation would only be appropriate for clients heavily involved in online Incel communities and would be inappropriate for clients who are minimally involved or merely expressing curiosity. The qualification here is that members of these online communities still often denigrate women, even if they exhibit strong anti-violence norms.

To be clear, a phased exit is likely to have more success than a demand for immediate disengagement. A harm reduction approach invites conversation while confrontation risks fortifying a harmful belief system.

Additional Literature

There is a small but growing body of literature on the Incel movement. While this is far from an exhaustive list, the following sources are a good starting place for practitioners seeking to learn more about the movement and its adherents. Unfortunately, research on clinical best-practices remains limited, but is an important direction for future research. Most of these articles are freely available online.

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Notable Cases Since 2009

Date: August 2009

Location: Collier Township, PA

Perpetrator: George Sodini

Casualties: Four Killed, Nine Injured

Summary: Sodini committed a mass shooting at an LA Fitness aerobics class in Pennsylvania. He left a note in his bag outlining his hatred for women.

Date: May 2014

Location: Isla Vista, CA

Perpetrator: Elliot Rodger

Casualties: Six Killed, Fourteen Injured

Summary: Rodger committed a shooting, stabbing and vehicle ramming targeted at University of California - Santa Barbara students. He wrote a detailed manifesto and uploaded a video on YouTube highlighting his disdain for women and his lack of relationships.

Date: July 2015

Location: Edmonton, AB

Perpetrator: Sheldon Bentley

Casualties: One Killed

Summary: Bentley stomped a homeless man to death while he was employed as a security guard. At sentencing, he attributed the murder to his anger at being involuntarily celibate.

Date: October 2015

Location: Roseburg, OR

Perpetrator: Chris Harper-Mercer

Casualties: Ten Killed, Eight Injured

Summary: Harper-Mercer was enrolled at Umpqua Community College when he committed the mass shooting at the school. He cited Elliot Rodger as inspiration and also wrote his own detailed manifesto.

Date: December 2017

Location: Aztec, NM

Perpetrator: William Atchison

Casualties: Three Killed

Summary: Atchison committed a school shooting at his former school, Aztec High School. Atchison was active on several Incel forums and used the username 'Elliot Rodger'.

Notable Cases Since 2009

Date: April 2018

Location: Toronto, ON

Perpetrator: Alek Minassian

Casualties: Ten Killed, Sixteen Injured

Summary: Minassian rented a van and drove it through the business sector of Toronto, actively swerving into pedestrians. Prior to the incident Minassian posted on Facebook praising Elliot Rodger.

Date: November 2018

Location: Tallahassee, FL

Perpetrator: Scott Beierle

Casualties: Three Killed, Five Injured

Summary: Beirele shot individuals at a Florida hot yoga studio. He had posted videos on YouTube identifying as an Incel and had been banned from Florida State University for harassing female athletes and coaches.

Date: January 2019

Location: Denver, CO

Perpetrator: Christopher Cleary

Casualties: None

Summary: Cleary was arrested after posting on Facebook threatening to shoot as many girls as possible.

Date: June 2019

Location: Sudbury, ON

Perpetrator: Alex Stavropoulos

Casualties: One Injured

Summary: Stavropoulos stabbed a pregnant woman in the neck in a parking lot, citing his anger that white women would not have sex with him.

Date: July 2019

Location: Utica, NY

Perpetrator: Brandon Clark

Casualties: One Killed

Summary: Brandon Clark met up with the victim to attend a concert after conversing with her online. He stabbed the victim to death and posted the photos on Discord. Clark administered a page called 'Darkcel Gaming'.

Notable Cases Since 2009

Date: February 2020

Location: Toronto, ON

Perpetrator: Unnamed Minor

Casualties: One Killed, Two Injured

Summary: The accused, armed with a machete, stabbed two women and a man at a massage parlor. Authorities noted that the perpetrator espoused Incel ideology and charged him with terrorism.

Date: May 2020

Location: Glendale, AZ

Perpetrator: Armando Hernansez

Casualties: Three Injured

Summary: Hernandez self-identified as an Incel after his arrest. He committed a shooting at an outdoor mall and specifically targeted women and couples

Work Cited

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