

EVIDENCE BRIEF

The **Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council** in collaboration with the **Employment and Social Development Canada**

SSHRC's Imagining Canada's Future initiative mobilizes social sciences and humanities research to address emerging economic, societal and knowledge needs for Canada, and help guide decision making across all sectors, toward a better future. This evidence brief addresses the Future Challenge Area of: **The Emerging Asocial Society**.

Tracing radicalization to the incel movement and its connection to loneliness

About the project

This knowledge synthesis develops a systematic review of scholarship related to the online ideology of incels. This subculture, a portmanteau of involuntary and celibate, has become synonymous with a generation of disenfranchised and sexually deprived young men who voice their frustrations on electronic media such as forums and dedicated websites. Scholarship on the incel ideology emphasizes the centrality of loneliness and isolation among adherents, which is interrelated with problematic internet behaviours.

This project examines empirical research on engagement, escalation/radicalization and desistance by asking:

1. Why do people initially become engaged with incel groups, and how does loneliness extending from the emerging asocial society influence engagement?
2. Once engaged, how does the incel ideology progress to extreme views and acts of violence/self-harm?
3. What is known about desistance from inceldom, and what practicable interventions are possible to address engagement, extremism, violence and self-harm?

Our systematic review identified empirical studies and books related to incels and inceldom. The project synthesizes this knowledge to provide clarity about the incel identity, the characteristics of involved individuals and effective practices for intervention. These findings will inform future responsive frameworks employed at various levels of government and their agencies when shaping socio-legal responses to inceldom. Our study also identifies benefits, barriers and potential pitfalls that may come with enforcement, shaped by contextual knowledge about the asocial influences of internet use on already isolated individuals.

Key findings

The research findings below can be used by policy makers and researchers when considering the causes of inceldom and when developing possible responses to engagement, radicalization and desistance.

1. What is an incel
 - a. Incels ascribe sexual frustration to personal and external barriers, including physical and mental attributes, and socially constructed notions of attractiveness and status.
 - b. Many express a sense of aggrieved entitlement. While most often connected to sexuality, this world view also carries over to other social domains. Unmet social and sexual expectations may portend humiliation and ultimately violence.
 - c. Reductive caricatures of sexually successful men ("Chads") and women ("Stacys") have encouraged a homogenizing transnational ideology. Additional neologisms drawn from popular culture form a constellation of commonly used hateful, discriminatory and misogynistic memes (e.g., "Red Pill").
 - d. Perpetrators of incel-related violence have been "canonized." Examples include Elliott Rodger and Alec Minassian, whose acts are revered.
2. Demographic characteristics
 - a. Incels tend to be cis-gendered heterosexual men but are otherwise demographically diverse. Additional identity groups, including women, may form smaller related communities (e.g., "femcels").
 - b. Incels often report a history of social ostracism during middle and high school years, including bullying and sexual rejection.

c. High rates of mental health and psychological concerns are reported, including depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation. Incels also report high rates of neurodivergence.

3. Engagement

- a. Advice/support-seeking activities online may lead to initial exposure to incel circles.
- b. Online support-seeking behaviours may be triggered by perceived local conditions, including scarcity of single women, high income inequality and gendered income gaps.
- c. Recent scholarship demonstrates increased engagement post-COVID. This includes increases in the number of posts and threads, posting frequency and violent/vitriolic discourse.
- d. A very small number of incels will progress to acts of extreme violence and self-harm. Despite low occurrence rates, these acts are shared online, gaining hyper-visibility. Although most incels are not violent and many will reject violence, acts of violence ascribed to incel ideology are generally celebrated.
- e. Additional research on pathways to radicalization specific to incels is needed.

4. Detection and interventions

- a. Very few incel-specific detection tools exist. Adjacent research related to extremism and terrorism can be applied to identify proximal and distal warning behaviours associated with escalation to acts of violence.
- b. Interventions aimed at reducing engagement with inceldom or promoting desistance from inceldom should be multifaceted and emphasize policy approaches targeting both individual and societal conditions that contribute to participation in inceldom.

Policy implications

Policy development aimed at limiting engagement with inceldom / promoting desistance from inceldom should target:

- Detection, prevention and individual-level intervention
 - Incel-centric beliefs can be detected through communication typologies.
 - Preventative and integrative responses delivered through sites of work and socialization may foster empathy.
 - Intensive mental health supports should develop prosocial behaviours and remediate ideological dogma.
- Operational and communications interventions
 - Prohibiting and removing incel discourse funnels community members to extremist, underregulated services.
 - Self-directed moderation empowers harmful discourse and neutralizes debate.
 - Balanced, automated content moderation can assist with early detection.
- Government policy
 - Legal responses should target individual actors and actions, as widescale criminalization has limited effect on decentralized and anonymous groups.
 - National-level dialogue about regulating communications platforms is advised.
 - Inclusive cyber-safety and media skills curriculum can address gateways to inceldom.
 - Greater national investment in mental health supports relative to digital-era issues will facilitate access to services.
- Future research
 - The body of empirically validated incel-specific scholarship is underdeveloped.
 - Research on post-engagement desistance and pathways to violence is needed.
 - Primary, secondary and tertiary programmatic development and testing is also needed.
 - We encountered a surplus of research about incel dialogue/discourse.

CONTACT THE RESEARCHERS

James Popham, PhD, associate professor and chair, Department of Criminology, Wilfrid Laurier University; jpopham@wlu.ca

Samantha Henderson, PhD, project coordinator, Centre for Research on Security Practices, Wilfrid Laurier University; sahenderson@wlu.ca

Stacey Colliver, PhD candidate, Department of Sociology and Legal Studies, University of Waterloo; scollive@uwaterloo.ca

Lucas Pokrywa, PhD candidate, Department of Political Science, University of Western Ontario; lpokrywa@uwo.ca

FURTHER INFORMATION

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