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## CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN C&N – *The Incel Phenomenon*

17-18 June 2021, online event

# The Incel Phenomenon: Exploring Internal and External Issues Around Involuntary Celibates

## Key outcomes

The incel phenomenon is being studied more and more, from a P/CVE perspective as well. As there are links between certain parts of the incel movement to (other) types of extremism, it is important to try to understand what is going on in this mostly online world. During the RAN Communication and Narratives (C&N) Working Group meeting on the incel phenomenon, the focus was on exploring the underlying issues and root causes that result in the potential threat incels pose to themselves and others<sup>1</sup>.

Key meeting outcomes:

1. While **not all incels are violent**, incels' online ecosystem breeds and encourages **extreme attitudes** related to suicide, interpersonal violence and violent misogyny. Awareness of the depth of the **underlying issues** is crucial to be able to acknowledge their grievances and needs (e.g. societal pressures/norms, identity, belonging, security, ostracism, etc.).
2. **The incel ideology differs from many other (extremist) ideologies or communities**. While issues like isolation, loneliness and mental health, and dealing with bullying can also be underlying concerns in other ideologies, they are very much present at the forefront of the incel community/ideology. They feel they did not choose their identity, but were forced into it.
3. A whole-of-society approach is needed by **training all first line practitioners** (not only the ones with a focus on P/CVE) on the topic of incels. The aim is to raise awareness and start discussing underlying issues early on (primary prevention) with a focus on the risk of suicide, using an empathetic approach and trying to strengthen the internal locus of control.
4. Regarding treatment, it is important to **recognise incels' trauma/very real grievances** while not encouraging their ideology. Work on mental health awareness and against the stigma amongst incels. Portray **self-help as a strength**, not a weakness.

<sup>1</sup> For more general background on incels, their terminology and ideology, see the [conclusion paper of the RAN Small-Scale meeting on Incels](#) and Moonshot's [Guide to Symbols and Terminology about incels](#).

5. When proposing alternative narratives, **offer alternative representations of masculinity** (that are not the typical alpha man stereotype, but are seen as masculine/attractive) and convey that many people feel overwhelmed by social and moral uncertainty, 'chaos' and injustice, and these are normal reactions to a complex world.

## Highlights of the discussion

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The two-day meeting on the incel phenomenon had lively discussions in both Q&A sessions and the chat, and an interactive part using online collaboration tool Miro<sup>2</sup>. The insights and highlights presented below are therefore not only based on the presentations, but also on the input from all participants.

### Background on incels & their ideology

Incel is a portmanteau for 'Involuntary Celibate'. Incels believe they are unable to access sex, mainly due to genetic factors, evolutionary predetermined processes of mate selection and societal structures. They believe women find them unattractive and that women are only interested in handsome 'alpha males' (also called 'Chads'). The '80/20 Rule' is commonly mentioned amongst incels, meaning that the most attractive 20% of men have monopolised 80% of women. Since 2014, multiple public violent incidents (i.e. mass-shootings) have been tied to incels in the United States and Canada. Because of this, the phenomenon has gained the attention of P/CVE in Europe too.

Several important insights on incels and their ideology are:

- In contrast to common perception, incels are a **diverse group** in terms of sexual orientation, race or ethnic background and religion. Moreover, while the surface issue is the interest in sex, this is certainly not the only matter incels are interested in as the surface issue has deep-rooted perceived grievances.
- The incel ideology is centred around the idea of '**the Black pill**'.<sup>3</sup> Incels believe their perceived inability to have sex and/or a romantic relationship is predetermined by genetics and society. This is rooted in ideas of hypergamy (women are only interested in the most attractive and successful men) and gynocentrism (modern society is structured in a way that benefits women, and thereby oppresses men – especially those deemed to be lesser, i.e. an incel).
- The worldview of incels is based on an **external locus of control**. They believe their situation and what happens to them is outside of their own control, thereby blaming everyone and everything else (women, attractive men, society) for their misery. This belief of not being in control ties into underlying mental health issues like anxiety and depression that will be discussed later.
- The incel ideology can be seen as part of the online '**Manosphere**', a collection of online spaces promoting masculinity and misogyny, and opposing feminism. Other communities in the Manosphere are, for example, Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) and pick-up artists (PUA).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Miro is a tool that allows multiple participants to actively collaborate in an online environment, for example by simultaneously writing and moving post-its on a virtual board. For more information, see <https://miro.com/app/dashboard/>.

<sup>3</sup> The term 'Black pill' is derived from the concept of Red Pill and Blue Pill. The terms 'red pill' and 'blue pill' refer to a choice between the willingness to learn a potentially unsettling or life-changing truth by taking the red pill, or remaining in contented ignorance with the blue pill. The term Red Pill is commonly used in the Manosphere, regarding men 'waking up' to the 'real' world where women are better off than men. 'Black pill' is then a more extreme version of red pill, as it includes the view that men are unable to change their position. See also Moonshot's [Guide to Symbols and Terminology about incels](#).

<sup>4</sup> Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) is an anti-feminist, misogynistic, mostly online community advocating for men to separate themselves from women and from a society that they believe has been corrupted by feminism (see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Men\\_Going\\_Their\\_Own\\_Way](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Men_Going_Their_Own_Way)). Pick Up Artists is a men's movement whose goal is seduction and sexual success with women (see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pickup\\_artist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pickup_artist)).

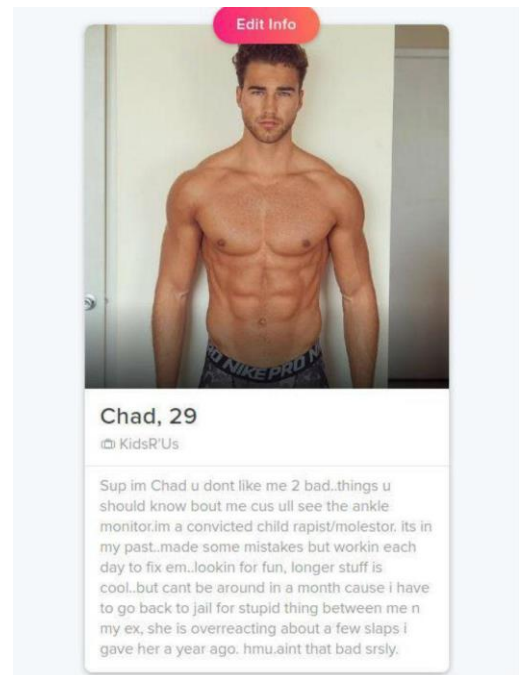
The incel community is mainly present online on dedicated websites like incels.is, but also on both mainstream social media (i.e. YouTube, Facebook, Twitter) and less regulated platforms (i.e. 4chan, 8kun). Several incel forums or pages (e.g. a sub-Reddit) have already been banned by the platform due to harmful content.

While there have been no public violent incidents related to incels in Europe<sup>5</sup> so far, incel forums are frequented throughout Europe. Unique users from almost all EU Member States, with a majority in Germany, were found on an incel forum. Moreover, country-specific themes can be found in the narratives of incels from Europe, for example the role of height and race. The role of height is related to the above average height of men in some European countries. According to incels, women are unwilling to date short men. In terms of race, depending on the country, being a person of colour can either be an advantage or disadvantage according to incels.

## Three levels of violence

One of the main insights is that the incel phenomenon is a very broad, complex and deep-rooted problem. It is not just about the surface issue of public violent incidents of individuals identifying as an incel. In order to further explain this, **three tiers of violence** can be identified:

- **Personal violence:** self-harm and suicidal ideation are common amongst incels. For example, the term LDAR, or 'Lay Down And Rot', is frequently used on incel forums.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, getting self-help or seeking mental health support are discouraged amongst incels.
- **Interpersonal violence:** incels are frequently encouraged to take others with them if they are going to harm themselves, i.e. that if they commit an attack, this should also harm other individuals. Moreover, women are harassed by incels both online and offline. An example is 'Chadfishing',<sup>7</sup> where an incel poses as a 'Chad' (i.e. the stereotypical handsome alpha male, according to incels) to get a date with a woman only to scorn them about this. The 'Chads' they pose as are also targeted by putting down harmful texts under their fake profile (i.e. "I'm a convicted child molester"). This way, incels can prove that it is indeed only the looks that matter for a woman that would still want to date such a person (see image).
- **Societal violence:** violence aimed at society through mass shootings, for example intended for attractive women. Since 2014, multiple mass shootings have been tied to incels in the United States and Canada. Within the incel community, these mass shooters are often idolised and seen as examples. Moreover, elements of gamification can be found on incel forums (i.e. scoreboard ranking of perpetrators).



<sup>5</sup> The only incident where it was debated whether the shooter was potentially an incel was the Hanau shooting on 19 February, 2020. However, it was found that while the perpetrator was a male supremacist and misogynist, he had no clear connections to the incel community or ideology. For more information, see the ICCT publication: <https://icct.nl/publication/male-supremacism-and-the-hanau-terrorist-attack-between-online-misogyny-and-far-right-violence/>.

<sup>6</sup> Lay Down And Rot is a phrase claiming that self-development, positive behaviour or corrective actions (e.g. looksmaxxing) are pointless, and that an individual's situation cannot be improved. To LDAR is to give up on activities that are inconsistent with a 'rotting' lifestyle. Acceptable 'rotting' behaviour includes browsing incel forums, watching pornography, withdrawing from human contact and remaining in bed. Source: Moonshot's [Guide to Symbols and Terminology about incels](#) (p.15).

<sup>7</sup> 'Chadfishing' is derived from the term 'Catfishing', which is a deceptive activity where a person creates a fictional persona or fake identity on a social networking service to usually target a specific victim (source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catfishing>). 'Chadfishing', then, is specifically impersonating a 'Chad' (i.e. an attractive alpha male in the eyes of an incel).

While societal violence gets the most attention in the public debate, the fact that personal and interpersonal violence is commonly talked about amongst incels indicates there are underlying mental health and society issues that are often overlooked.

## Social & mental health

In terms of **societal pressure**, certain issues that are common amongst millennials can be tied to problems incels experience as well. These are, for example, high expectations from society to perform and pressure from social media regarding what it means to be successful and attractive. These issues can result in a negative state of mind and lead to mental health problems that might make individuals more vulnerable to ideologies like incel.

During the meeting, there was a consensus that **both mental health issues and potential security issues** are equally important to tackle. This is especially important from a prevention point of view. If you want to prevent individuals from identifying as an incel in the first place, the underlying issues need to be addressed first. The incel ideology and incel forums are especially attractive to **vulnerable young men**. Anxiety and depression are very common amongst incels. The ETA program in Canada run by Yorktown Family Services has several young individuals involved in incel forums that were referred to the program. These young clients:

- often experienced a history of relational trauma as a result of abuse, neglect, physical and/or emotional trauma within the family system;
- exhibit a social skill deficit. For example, poor boundaries in relationships (tendency to overwhelm others and then get rejected), poor recognition of social cues, lack of basic conversational skills;
- demonstrate highly sexualised behaviour. This included no awareness of boundaries and a distorted view of what healthy relationships are (violence and exposure to violence is normalised).

### Learning from the Hikikomori phenomenon

Hikikomori is a phenomenon that originated in Japan. It is defined as a phenomenon in which persons become recluses in their own homes, avoiding various social situations.<sup>1</sup> The phenomenon is seen as a serious issue in Japan, and it has also been researched in several European countries in relation to youth who socially exclude themselves (e.g. France, Italy). Several interesting hikikomori characteristics were identified that can potentially be related to the incel phenomenon:

- 70-80% of hikikomori are men.
- Hikikomori and incels both spend the majority of their time online, avoiding 'offline' social interaction.
- Similar underlying issues between hikikomori and incels can be found (e.g. the pressure of social expectations and mental health problems like social anxiety disorder).

Incels could see the hikikomori phenomenon as another proof of discrimination/alienation of young men in society (as they become too afraid to leave their homes).

Moreover, **individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD)** appear to be disproportionately represented in the incel community (e.g. in an October 2019 user poll on the incels.co website, roughly 1 in 4 of the 550 respondents stated they were diagnosed with autism). Social communication and interaction impairments (due to ASD) may cause challenges in making and maintaining peer friendship groups. Because young individuals with ASD experience higher rates of bullying and rejection by peers in the physical space, the internet is already the "preferred conduit to the outside world" for many of them. On online forums, so also in *incel* forums, interaction makes them feel valued and provides them with an identity – something they did not experience in the offline world. Features of ASD that would contribute to this include impaired Theory of Mind (ToM, the ability to attribute mental states to ourselves and others) and rigid thinking.

## Contradictions & ideological cross-over

Some interesting observations were made on how **the incel ideology is very ambiguous and actually contradicts itself**. This shows that underlying issues incels experience, like seeking an identity and a sense of belonging and other insecurities, lead to an ideology that is not clear-cut or based on one central idea. This can be illustrated with several examples of paradoxes within the incel ideology:

- The incel ideology is based on simultaneously despising and desiring women. Incels actually want to be in a romantic relationship and have sex with a woman, but at the same time women are also at fault for not giving incels the opportunity to carry this out.
- Alpha males, or 'Chads', are also despised by incels, as they are the ones who get all the attention from women. At the same time, some of the solutions posed by incels actually include being or becoming more like a Chad. For example, to become more attractive through plastic surgery (i.e. 'Looksmaxxing'), to become more physically attractive by going to the gym (i.e. 'Gymmaxxing'), or by going to South-East Asia because, according to incels, even an incel can be a Chad there and get sex (i.e. 'SEA-maxxing').
- No one wants to be an incel (as they are *involuntary* celibate), but incels who try to escape or 'ascend' the community are brought down hard and pulled back in by other members. So, while individuals actually want to ascend, go on a date with a woman, get a girlfriend, and escape their incelhood, the community of incels actually prevents individuals from escaping. This is done, for example, by talking down to the individual ('your date won't want you anyway') or the girl/woman ('she won't be attractive anyway'). Moreover, *if* an incel succeeds in 'ascending', they are completely shut out and often seen as 'false incels' (i.e. 'he was never an incel to begin with').
- Geographical differences also lead to contradictions. For example, in Germany incels of colour feel they are being compared to tall, white 'Aryan Chads' and complain German girls do not want men of colour, whereas in Sweden incels feel they are less desirable than men of colour to the point where they advise incels of colour to visit Sweden for sex tourism purposes.
- Some incels do have sex, but still claim incelhood because they pay for sex, whereas Chads do not have to do any work at all to get sex.
- The question whether incels are politically motivated also has an ambiguous answer. On the one hand, some solutions offered by incels are to change society in a way that benefits them (e.g. 'sexual Marxism'), some even calling for an incel rebellion. On the other hand, incels want to be seen as a subculture and not as a political movement. Moreover, the Blackpill ideology and external locus of control ironically would mean that no action by incels themselves will or can change the system.

Within a marginal group of incels, the incel ideology has **cross-overs with extremist ideologies**. Connections with right-wing extremism are mostly seen amongst this group, but there are also some examples of incels with ties to Islamist extremism. Within this marginal group of incels, the incel ideology could be seen as an overarching and unifying ideology based on shared grievances (i.e. loneliness) and the central role of misogyny in these different ideologies.

## Recommendations

### Deepen the understanding of the phenomenon from a P/CVE perspective

- The incel community is built on a foundation of nihilism and self-hatred. While not all incels are violent, incels' online ecosystem breeds and encourages extreme attitudes related to suicide, interpersonal violence and violent misogyny. Acknowledging that incelhood is not simply about being unable to find a sexual partner is important – it is about the deep insecurities that many men face today. Awareness of the depth of the underlying issues is crucial to be able to acknowledge their grievances and needs (e.g. societal pressures/norms, identity, belonging, security, ostracism, etc.).

- Incel ideology is different from many other ideologies/communities in how prevalent isolation, loneliness, mental health issues and dealing with issues like bullying is. They feel they did not choose their identity but were forced into it.
- First line practitioners need to take the incel ideology and its characteristics seriously.
- Perhaps the idea of what 'violent extremism' is should be expanded. A lot of the violence by incels is self-harm, but this is traditionally not seen as violent extremism.
- Giving former incels a 'voice' in research could help to gain trust with the academic and P/CVE community.
- Although some research indicates that people with ASD are overrepresented amongst incels, practitioners should be careful to note that simply having ASD does not in and of itself make someone vulnerable to becoming an incel.

### Prevention

- In primary prevention, digital media literacy is key and should be taught to young people. As a part of this, information about the skewed reality of the incel narrative can help to raise resilience amongst youth.
- It is equally important to demystify sex and sexuality amongst youth in order to help them gain a healthy perspective on their own body and sexuality, including the important notion of consent in a sexual relationship and risks related to toxic masculinity.
- On social media, the way identity is portrayed is a misrepresentation of reality that does not set the right example and paves the way for incel ideology and other problems. However difficult this may be, there is a need to change the way we engage with each other on social media.
- More focused on the vulnerable target group, there is a need for training first line practitioners on the topic of incels to raise awareness and to start discussing underlying issues early on (primary prevention). This training should include:
  - distinguishing between the different forms of violence, community interactions, mental health issues and other characteristics;
  - learning to differentiate between trolling (shitposting, provoking) and serious intentions, although it can be very difficult to make this distinction;
  - informing interventionists (psychologists, mentors) about specific misogynistic beliefs held by incels.
- It is also important to educate caregivers. Inform and engage with family members of potential incels. They do not need to know the ins and outs of the platforms their children may be using, but they need to know about certain words that are not acceptable and are part of misogynist / incel terminology.

### Getting in contact with (potential) incels

- Regard each individual as someone with unique reasons for identifying as an incel, or to turn violent against oneself or others. Do not categorise them as a homogenous group.
- Use a holistic outreach in spaces where incels congregate (e.g. video games, chat forums, etc.).
- Investigate forums / platforms where incels are active can be a way to identify incels. On a bigger scale, natural language processing analysis employing artificial intelligence could be used to examine the web. This will help identify incels in order to tailor more effective outreach programmes.

### Treatment & mental health aspects

- Recognise the incels trauma/grievances while not encouraging the ideology.
- Work on mental health awareness and against the stigma amongst incels. Portray self-help as a strength, not as a weakness.
- Part of the problem may be the incels' belief that mental health professionals are mostly/all women, so dispelling this narrative might be helpful in aiding interventions and help-seeking behaviour. Safely reintroducing women in a safe environment is important.
- Male role models that support other men who are struggling through positive encouragement can be an angle to take during treatment, emphasising healthier ideas of masculinities and body image.
- Also, it is advisable to include teachers and family (however, incels tend to have a troubled relationship with their parents). This would most likely also require training the parents.

### Offering alternative narratives

- Counter the stigma with healthier presentations of their problems and issues, offering alternative representations of masculinity that are neither Chad nor incel.
- Offer positive identities/feelings/experiences to reduce the space for negative feelings to build up.
- Offer a humanising outlook on women and their role in society and relationships.
- Convey the message that it is normal and socially acceptable to feel left out, self-critical, down, anxious or frustrated, and there are mainstream spaces and places for everyone.
- Convey the message that many people feel overwhelmed by social and moral uncertainty, 'chaos' and injustice, and these are normal reactions to a complex world.

## Relevant practices

1. [Estimated Time of Arrival](#) (Yorktown Family Services, Canada).
2. [The Redirect Method](#) (Moonshot, UK) has also been used to reach out to (potential) incels by visiting incel forums.

The next two pages provide a summary of the most important recommendations in an infographic.

Radicalisation Awareness Network



C&amp;N

# 9

## Recommendations for working with incels

This infographic offers 9 tangible recommendations for P/CVE professionals who work with incels or might encounter incels in their job, based on the RAN Communication & Narratives Working Group meeting on the incels phenomenon.

### 1 Recognise underlying issues

While **not all incels are violent**, the incels' online ecosystem breeds and encourages **extreme attitudes** related to suicide, interpersonal violence and violent misogyny. Awareness of the depth of the **underlying issues** is crucial to be able to acknowledge their grievances and needs (societal pressures/norms, identity, belonging, security, ostracism, etc.).



### 2 Be aware of unique ideological traits

The incel ideology differs from many other (extremist) ideologies or communities. While issues like isolation, loneliness and mental health, and dealing with bullying can also be underlying concerns in other ideologies, they are very much present at the forefront of the incel community/ideology. Incels feel they did not choose their identity, but were forced into it.



### 3 Educate youth on key topics

In primary prevention, **digital media literacy** is key and should be taught in school. It is equally important to **demystify sex and sexuality** amongst youth in order to help them gain a healthy perspective on their own body and sexuality (including the notion of consent).







## 4 Train first-line professionals

A whole-of-society approach is needed, **training all first line professionals** (not only the ones with a focus on P/CVE) on the topic of incels to raise awareness and to start discussing underlying issues early on (primary prevention). Focus on the risk of suicide, using an empathetic approach and try to strengthen the internal locus of control.

## 5 Educate parents or caregivers

**Inform caregivers** about certain online terminology and how they can talk about this with their children. Caregivers need to know about certain words that are not acceptable and are part of **misogynist or incel terminology**.



## 6 Use video gaming to your advantage

**Video gaming** could serve as an entry point for outreach and intervention, for instance by organising local gaming events online that include P/CVE practitioners who are also familiar with gaming and can have a conversation during the activity.

## 7 Identify incels online

**Investigating forums** or other platforms where incels are active can be a way to identify incels. Monitoring or being active in the places your target group is can help identify potential risks.



## 8 Break the stigma around mental health

Regarding treatment, it is important to **recognise incels' trauma and very real grievances**, while not encouraging their ideology. Work on mental health awareness and against the stigma amongst incels. **Portray self-help as a strength**, not as a weakness.

## 9 Break masculinity stereotypes

**Offer alternative representations of masculinity** and convey the message that many people feel overwhelmed by social and moral uncertainty, 'chaos' and injustice, and these are **normal reactions to a complex world**.



## Follow up

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Suggestions for further elaboration:

- Organise a meeting on how to train first line practitioners on the topic of incels.
- Organise a meeting to further explore the relation between incel ideology and extremist ideologies. What are the real underlying/overlapping issues that should/could be tackled by prevention? Is the incel ideology a separate form of extremist ideology?
- A meeting to further explore connections to adjacent fields like Hikikomori, maybe pro-anorexia forums, etc.

## Further reading

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[RAN in Focus podcast on Incels \(2021\)](#)