

## Small-scale meeting

09/03/2020

### CONCLUSION PAPER

*RAN small-scale expert meeting – Violent Incels and Challenges for P/CVE  
25 February 2021, Online*

# Violent Incels and Challenges for P/CVE

## Key outcomes

---

Incels are a highly diverse phenomenon. In recent years and in much of the wider discourse, the focus has been placed on the violent sub-forms of this phenomenon and, sometimes, on its potential interlinkages with violent extremist ideologies and related scenes. This small-scale meeting set out to increase understanding and further discuss the controversial topic of Involuntary Celibates, or Incels. The meeting also addressed their potential links to violence, as well as the need to engage with this topic in the context of prevention and countering of violent extremism (P/CVE). Participants discussed key facts about the underlying concepts and ideas, as well as its followers. Considering the growing attention this issue has received in public and professional debates in recent months, the meeting's objective was also to discuss whether P/CVE practitioners should respond to this complex phenomenon, and if they should, to what extent, how and where. Due to its exploratory nature, the overarching aim included mapping existing challenges as well as outlining first ideas on how RAN and P/CVE practitioners can further engage with the topic in the future. Important insights gained from included the following:

- Significant further awareness-raising measures are necessary to spread knowledge about the phenomenon, its different strands, complexities and multi-faceted follower base among the P/CVE community.
- Additional direct practical work and research with persons currently or formerly involved in the phenomenon is necessary to better understand individual pathways into and out of the mindset and belief-system.
- Similar to other contemporary phenomena, the fact that Incel communities tend to be only visible online creates a barrier for current P/CVE approaches to interact with their members.
- As is the case with other digital communities, interactions among community members are characterised by high levels of very dark humour desensitised to violence, layers of irony, and specific terminology. This makes it difficult to detect warning signs about the potential use of violence (against themselves and others).
- The strong stigma surrounding mental health support needs to be tackled among members of this target group who show disproportionately high rates of mental health problems.

## Highlights of the discussion

Challenges discussed by topical experts are presented below.

**Understanding the diverse set of people self-ascribing to the term Incel** and their varying sets of beliefs linked to “inceldom” presents one of the biggest challenges for the practice. As with many other forms of extreme beliefs or ideologies, inceldom is a spectrum characterised by a multi-faceted community and therefore difficult to generalise, as was also noted by Kuehl<sup>1</sup>. Incels believe they are unable to access sex due to genetic factors, evolutionarily predetermined processes of partner selection and due to societal structures. While some believe it is possible to increase their own chances of attracting a sexual partner (e.g. by working out or undergoing plastic surgery (strategies dubbed ‘looksmaxxing’)), followers of the more extreme “black pill” believe every individual attempt to increase their chances in the “sexual marketplace” to be futile due to the genetic predetermination of one’s physical appearance based on which women supposedly choose their partners. Real change, according to them, can only be brought about at the societal level, not the individual level (see next paragraph). In contradiction to what is often assumed in public debates, Incels are not necessarily heterosexual, white and from North America or Western Europe. Communities encompass members of various ethnic and religious backgrounds. However, they often refer to non-white Incels with specific (self-)degrading racist terms, such as currycel for Indian members.

**Supposed solutions offered by violent misogynist Incels** include self-harm and suicide, but also violence directed at others (see the paragraph on mental health issues), either through harassment and intimidation of women, or acts of mass violence directed at women or at men who are able to access sex. Long-term solutions proposed for the societal level include ideas to fight against feminism, remove women’s rights and the notion of ‘sexual Marxism’ (either state-enforced monogamy, government funded sex workers, legalisation of mass rape or a ‘volunteer corps’ of women enlisted to have sex with Incels), or the removal/reduction of the age of consent to be able to gain sexual access to young virgin girls.

**Incels relation to other (online) extremist movements and cultures** remains particularly difficult to grasp. Some Incels associate themselves or identify with extremist groups or movements. For example, violent right-wing extremist content is shared on Incel platforms by some members. As noted by Lewis & Ware<sup>2</sup>, violent ‘Incels also mimic some of the communications tactics adopted by the far-right, such as promoting the publication of manifestos and live-streaming of their violent attacks’. They also note that violent Incels have used terrorist tactics similar to those used by violent Islamist extremists (VIE), such as attacking soft targets with limited to no defence capabilities. However, associating all Incels with extremism and terrorism in general, and VRWE in particular, runs the risk of stigmatising the very diverse communities self-ascribing to the Incel label. As such, this could potentially do more harm than good.

**Mental health issues** seem to play a particularly important role among Incel communities. Whereas this issue was often overestimated in past discourses around VRWE and VIE, Incels appear to have a much higher base rate of mental health issues vis à vis other radical communities (self-report caveats apply). Incel communities seem to be rife with depression and a nihilistic communal celebration of low self-esteem.<sup>3,4</sup> At the core of their ideology lies the idea that their position is unchangeable, which leads some to the conclusion that suicide is a legitimate solution to their perceived suffering. The fact that in many misogynist Incel forums murder-suicides targeting women or non-Incel men are encouraged to “make suicide count” adds an additional layer of urgency and complexity. However, Incel communities are extremely resistant to the idea of seeking mental health support. Individuals mentioning therapy or similar measures are cruelly mocked. Overcoming the stigma of mental health

<sup>1</sup> Kuehl (2020): [Incel Communities: Breeding Ground for Radicalized Violence?](#)

<sup>2</sup> Lewis & Ware (2020): [Spring Provides Timely Reminder of Incel Violence—And Clarifies How to Respond.](#)

<sup>3</sup> According to a survey on the forum incels.co, 67.5 % of the users describe themselves as suicidal, 85.4 % as depressed and 74.5 % suffer from anxiety. Source: Belltower: [Interview with Veronika Kracher.](#)

<sup>4</sup> Aja Romano (2020): [‘What a woman-led incel support group can teach us about men and mental health’.](#)

or at least finding ways to convince individuals of its potential benefits is therefore necessary (see recommendations).

**Incels are visibly mainly online in digital environments and communities.** Different strands gather on specific sub-forums or groups of known websites such as reddit or 4chan, 8kun and Discord. Incel-specific websites and forums exist as well, the biggest and most well-known is Incels.co (which is currently back to its former Incels.is). These **platforms are largely unregulated** and only moderated on a very basic level. This allows for the widespread sharing of images and pictures depicting violence, as well as fantasies and calls for violence, together with non-violent groups dedicated to sharing everyday experiences. These websites present a twofold challenge for P/CVE practitioners. Firstly, they need to keep up with the fast-paced developments regarding narratives, topics, ideas and language discussed and used among these communities. However, many practitioners do not have the resources to do this. Dynamics such as shitposting and trolling,<sup>5</sup> which are key elements of Incel communities, violent or otherwise, remain difficult to understand and navigate for practitioners, especially when it comes to discussions on the use of violence (more information on [extremists' use of humour can be found here](#)). Also, the desensitisation to violent language combined with crude forms of humour make it challenging to differentiate between potentially violent and non-violent members. As a result, actual warning signs and specific buzzwords may not be as easy to detect. Secondly, the websites create uncertainty about **how to engage with or counter the violent members of these communities** without alienating and potentially stigmatising the non-violent members.

Lastly, not much is known about the particular **dynamics of radicalisation, grooming and recruiting among Incel communities**. Individuals are not drawn into the incel group by charismatic leaders or recruiters. Rather, a sort of reciprocal grooming can be observed, in which peer-to-peer pressure, in synergy with the value attributed to the actions of violent Incel "heroes" like Elliot Rodger and Alek Minassian, seems to have remarkable radicalisation potential.<sup>6</sup> A case study examining Rodger's "manifesto" can be found [here](#). The persisting knowledge gap about how these dynamics unfold exactly **leads to problems for practitioners attempting to design suitable approaches**.

## Recommendations

Several recommendations were discussed during the meeting. Some general recommendations are presented first.

- **Raise awareness on the phenomenon of Incels, particularly among practitioners in the field of P/CVE.** Practitioners should be educated and trained to understand the different strands of Incel ideology, the risks associated with it, the platforms that are used and about phenomenon-specific terminology that is used. This basic knowledge is necessary for being able to recognise potential warning signals, buzzwords and to prepare steps towards direct counselling.
- **Recognise the growing threat posed by the rise of male supremacist communities and ideologies,** such as parts of the Incel spectrum, including the use of violence and the fact that this requires a long-term holistic effort among all P/CVE actors, but also at the larger societal level.

<sup>5</sup> "Shitposting" and "trolling" both describe online posting strategies in which deliberately provocative, sometimes off-topic and/or insulting comments are published on social media in order to upset others, elicit emotional responses, and to distract from the original topic. Recent years have seen the use of professionalised trolling campaigns aimed at derailing political debates, sometimes even turning into harassment and abuse of specific individuals or groups.

<sup>6</sup> Brzuszkiewicz (2020): 'Incel Radical Milieu and External Locus of Control,' [The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague \(ICCT\) Evolutions in Counter-Terrorism, Vol. 2 \(November 2020\): 1-20](#), p. 10.

- **Invest in monitoring and analysis of Incel platforms and environments.** This is necessary both for law enforcement to understand credible threats coming from these scenes but also for non-security actors to properly understand the narratives and to be able to engage with individuals authentically.
- **Do not (inadvertently) contribute to Incel narratives of victimhood and entitlement.** Practitioners, but also members of the media and policymakers, need to be cautious not to unquestioningly reinforce Incel claims or to mainstream specific terminology and thus validate their belief system.

For first-line practitioner who engage with individuals, it is key to:

- **Go online and stay up to speed.** Incel communities flourish online, so first-line practitioners cannot stay offline. However, this does not necessarily mean intervening in their “digital homes” is a good idea. Being online can also mean watching and learning, trying to understand in order to offer spaces for discussion and exchange in a safe, separate setting at a later stage. More information on how to work online as a practitioner can be found on the RAN website, e.g. in papers on [doing digital youth work in a P/CVE context](#) or [other papers from the RAN Working Group on Communications & Narratives](#).
- **Do not reinvent the wheel.** When working with Incels always look for existing and established programmes from adjacent fields, such as programmes working on intimate partner violence or toxic masculinity. It may not always be necessary to develop an entirely new approach, raising awareness and building networks is a good starting point. The same applies when working with family members of affected persons.
- **Try to understand underlying Incel grievances without legitimising their conclusions.** Where possible, carefully analyse the individual needs of the person and engage with a non-judgemental attitude. While many sub-forms are clearly misogynist, potential violence perpetrated by attackers from these communities may also target men, especially those who are assumed to be successful with women based on their looks. Also, the term itself is gender-neutral, which leads van der Veer to conclude that the phenomenon of Incels need a ‘consciously gender-neutral approach’. One of the ways to support such an approach is to listen to what perpetrators, and the people involved in the Incel movement (including female members of these communities) have to say themselves.<sup>7</sup>
- **Include and normalise mental health support.** Overcoming the stigma of seeking mental health support could play a key role in helping individuals within the Incel community. Discussions suggest that the involvement of former members of Incel communities, who were able to leave and successfully sought out mental health support, could be a useful strategy to overcome this stigma. In contrast to current members, who are usually ridiculed when suggesting mental health treatment as a potential solution, “inspiring examples” of formers could hold the necessary credibility to convince those who are already struggling. Generally, the heavy reliance on the online space offers opportunities in terms of P/CVE since individuals may be more open for online service provision. Mental health workers should be involved in this topic, ideally in close collaboration with experienced P/CVE professionals from fields such as (digital) youth work and rehabilitation.

<sup>7</sup> [van der Veer \(2020\): 'Analysing personal accounts of perpetrators of incel violence: what do they want and who do they target?'](#)

## Follow up

This meeting was RAN's first step towards raising awareness and deepening a complete understanding of the phenomenon. As described above, many challenges remain that require further exploration within RAN on how first-line practitioners from different professions can best engage with this topic and work to overcome this diverse set of challenges. Additionally, [on 23 March 2021 a webinar was held to spread knowledge](#) and the current state of debate among a larger number of practitioners. All these efforts will feed into a dedicated specialised paper that aims to provide further guidance to practice.

## Further reading

Incels have developed their own coded and highly specialised language, which they use to communicate in online forums and spread their ideology. The guide [‘Incels: a Guide to Symbols and Terminology’, developed by Moonshot CVE](#), aims to demystify the jargon and symbols they employ. It provides definitions and context; and demonstrate how language choices fit into a wider system of belief. By doing so, we hope to empower practitioners, front-line service workers and journalists to identify individuals who are involved with the incel community, understand their unique frames of reference, and ultimately, feel confident to engage with them.

The guide [‘Involuntary Celibates: Background for Practitioners’, produced by the Organization for the Prevention of Violence in Canada](#) provides a brief overview of the phenomenon. It describes key tenants of the ideology, demographics and characteristics, policy responses and suggestions for practitioners.

This [ICCT perspective](#) presents three issues that can add value to the study and discourse pertaining to Incel violence. First, it argues that in order to understand the perpetrators of Incel violence, we should overcome (legitimate) resistance to their own personal narratives and accounts and closely read them in order to accurately assess motives and intent. Second, men are targeted by Incel violence too. Third, women cannot be ruled out as potential perpetrators. This perspective concludes with a discussion of whether Incel violence should indeed be considered terrorism and closes by making a case for a consciously gender-neutral approach to the topic. [Another ICCT Special Edition paper](#) on the Incel Radical Milieu and External Locus of Control examines the pillars of Incel ideology through an analysis of Incels' own vocabulary and narratives.

[A paper authored by and ICCT and the Institute for Research on Male Supremacism](#) (IRMS) examines male supremacism as a right-wing extremist ideology, one that has contributed to terrorist attacks, primarily in the US, but also in Canada and Europe. It focuses on ideologies directly connected to terrorism.

This [briefing in New America written by three researchers from the IRMS](#) provides a comprehensive overview of the phenomenon's history, different strands, its relation with violence and better-known forms of extremism and concludes with very useful recommendations to policy and practice.