**Societies Should Not Ignore Their Incel Problem**

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Abstract

Involuntary celibate men ("Incels") commonly advocate for societal disruption, including violence toward women. Their anger can make them susceptible to radicalization, revolution, or reactionary hostility. Research efforts aimed at identifying the causes and consequences of Incels' beliefs are needed to address this growing problem.

*Keywords*:  incels; violence; misogyny; young male syndrome; hypergyny; celibacy

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Involuntary celibates, or "Incels", are a self-identified subculture of heterosexual men deeply frustrated by their inability to form sexual relationships with women. Their online activities range from self-help to deeply reactionary, misogynistic discourse. Periodically, their anger spills into offline violence motivated to punish women for sexual rejection and society for perpetuating a dating environment that they feel thwarts their interests. Physical violence is a rare but growing problem: Between 2014–18, reactionary Incels killed 50 people across North America and Europe [1]. Outside of their sphere, Incels are often viewed as self-absorbed and pathetic[i]. Nonetheless, the harm they can cause and the mental health problems they suffer [2,3] make it important to identify the content and causes of their beliefs.

Below, we introduce Incel culture and discuss some cultural and economic drivers of aggression and misogyny in heterosexual men. We seek to understand an important emerging phenomenon, but not to shift moral responsibility for harmful discourse or violence away from individual perpetrators. We then discuss the role cognitive scientists can play in understanding the drivers of Incel subculture and ameliorating its harms. Although we focus on Incels, the discussion is relevant more generally to the drivers of sexual harassment, sexual assault, and other forms of gender-based discrimination and violence.

**Who are the Incels?**

Between 60K-100K Incels actively participate in online forums globally, across various platforms and dedicated websites[ii]. A survey of 650 mostly North American and European users on incel.co indicates that Incels are young (18-30 years), of diverse ethnicity (55% identify as White or Caucasian), and mostly atheist/agnostic (60%)[iii]. Half never attended college and a quarter were not in education, employment, or training. Compared to the US male average, exceptionally high rates of autism, diagnosed depression, and diagnosed anxiety have been reported (Figure 1) [4].

Incels deploy a specialized language in forum discussions [5]. Taking the "redpill" (a cultural reference to *The Matrix*) entails embracing the view that the societal deck is stacked in women's favor at regular men's expense, with the women Incels consider desirable ("Stacys") flocking to men who Incels perceive as genetically, aesthetically, and financially well-endowed ("Chads"). Despite evidence that women seeking relationships with men evaluate men along a range of dimensions—including intelligence, kindness, and humor [6]—Incels consider women inherently superficial, favoring stereotypically masculine "Chads". Their analyses cherry-pick scientific terms and ideas, deploying them to arrive at Incel-centric prescriptions.

Although some Incels attempt to improve their appearance ("looksmaxing"), circumstances, and interpersonal skills, many adopt the nihilistic "blackpill" view that non-Chads will never have sexual relationships with women [7]. Many Incels hold the contentious attitude that sex is a basic human right. Some consider women's rejection of them a punishable crime, calling for interventions to "redistribute sex" [8] by easing access to sex workers, eliminating no-fault divorce, and abolishing women's rights (necessitating women to pair with men for social advancement [ii]).

**Incels weren't born yesterday**

Although the Incel portmanteau is modern, aspects of the underlying problem are both widespread and ancient. "Young Male Syndrome"[iv] refers to the culturally widespread and disruptive propensity of younger men, particularly single men who perceive themselves to be low-status, to take risks and behave aggressively to eliminate competitors and climb the social hierarchy [9]. Self-identified Incels who fulminate online and are drawn to reactionary politics are just one expression of Young Male Syndrome anger. Other expressions can include gang members, militias, and those radicalized by religious causes [10–12].

Young Male Syndrome partially arises out of hypergyny, a common trend in which more women than men "marry up" in wealth or status [13,14]. Gender inequality is one driver of hypergyny because when

most women are worse off than most men, more women than men rely on marriage to survive and flourish. Even amid culturally variable, complex, and often idiosyncratic partner preferences, a modest difference in the proportion of women and men who "pair upward" intensifies the competition that poorer men experience as they compete for the attention of a smaller number of women [14]. In this context, some men engage in risky and violent status-seeking strategies and adopt misogynistic and sexist views of women [5]. In this way, hypergynous preferences and norms, arising from gender inequality, beget misogynistic and sexist attitudes that can then reinforce gender inequality and hypergyny.

**Cultural and economic drivers**

Young Male Syndrome varies with local cultural and economic circumstances. Sex ratio imbalances intensify the challenges of finding a partner [10]. So does legalized polygynous marriage—where one, typically wealthy man partners simultaneously with multiple women [12]. Even in societies that outlaw polygynous marriage, serial monogamy and non-marital sex create a de-facto polygyny [14]. Online dating apps may create a similar effect, with a small number of highly desirable men gaining by far the most likes[v].

Polygyny—legal or de facto—compounds the Incel problem and elevates interpersonal violence, theft, and property crime [11]. Polygyny can also lead to instability in places where it is practiced. Insurgencies commonly target young, low-status men for radicalization [12]. They offer material goods, money, jobs, and brides. The abduction of women and girls by organizations like Boko Haram exemplify the attempt to use the Young Male Syndrome as a political tool [12].

Some men may be adopting Incel views and identities in the context of increasing gender equality in the environments where they live. When the gap between women's and men's education and income decreases, fewer men can offer potential partners social or financial mobility. Women who might once have either been forced to marry, or felt compelled to marry, now benefit from greater autonomy in decisions

whether, and with whom, to partner. Income inequality, too, amplifies Young Male Syndrome [9] and the prevalence of Incels [5] by concentrating sexual attention on fewer, wealthier men [14].

While the links between these conditions and Incel challenges in finding partners do not eradicate Incel's personal responsibility for their actions, factors that amplify young men's difficulties in partnering are worth investigation because they can amplify a broader Incel problem, including the insalubrious behavior of Western reactionary Incels and the radicalization of young men to violent causes worldwide.

**How psychologists can address the growing Incel problem**

While it may be useful for psychologists to understand the broad-scale drivers of Young Male Syndrome and Incel self-identification that we outline here, there is a growing need for psychological research on individual variation in response to these drivers. Why do some men gravitate to Incel identity, and some Incels adopt misogynist and violent views, whereas some in similar circumstances do not? How does the acquisition or loss of power shape misogyny [e.g., 15]? Research could address how Incel beliefs and identities arise, developmental and sociocultural conditions that attract young men to violent subcultures, and the psychological mechanisms that lead to misogyny and violence.

Further, psychologists have much to offer in developing and delivering treatment for the challenges of poor mental health, social isolation, and masculine identity struggles endemic to young men who believe they have bleak prospects [4,5,8]. Interventions could include programs tackling unhelpful beliefs about physical looks, support to individuals to build social relationships and parenting skills, and healthy ways of negotiating the world of social media and dating apps. Incel forums may provide one entry point for directing many of those in need toward suitable interventions and non-judgmental psychosocial support. Incel services would need to be carefully marketed and probably delivered by men practitioners; interested readers should consult [8] for the most comprehensive recommendations to date.

Many readers may find themselves reflexively opposed to calls for better understanding of—and interventions to improve the lives of—aggressive, disruptive, and sexually entitled young men. And yet, learning to form and maintain romantic relationships is a critical milestone for young adults, and being unsuccessful in this arena has distinctly negative repercussions for those affected, and also for societies [10–12]. Finding ways to understand the causes and ameliorate the consequences of Incel disgruntlement without impinging the rights and wellbeing of others can benefit almost everybody, from the Incels themselves to the women and men at whom they direct their rage.

Incel-proposed solutions such as winding back gender equity or no-fault divorce laws would clearly be unacceptable, retrogressive steps. Interventions will have limited effectiveness unless Incels also commit to addressing their frustrations without alienating the public or impinging the rights of others, notably women. One creative approach would involve collaborating with social welfare groups to challenge income inequality, a cause of both Incel and non-Incel suffering. Further research into the causes and antecedents of Incel-related ideology online would help advance knowledge in this area, as would publicly available data on sex-based extremism[vi]. Challenging as the Incel problem might be, societies cannot ignore it. Further, we believe that psychologists have an important, as yet underutilized, role to play in understanding and addressing the growing Incel movement.

**Resources**

i https://www.vice.com/en/article/7xqw3g/this-is-what-the-life-of-an-incel-looks-like

ii https://moonshotteam.com/resource/understanding-and-preventing-incel-violence-in-canada/

iii https://www.adl.org/blog/online-poll-results-provide-new-insights-into-incel-community

iv https://dictionary.apa.org/young-male-syndrome/

v https://qz.com/1051462/these-statistics-show-why-its-so-hard-to-be-an-average-man-on-dating-apps/

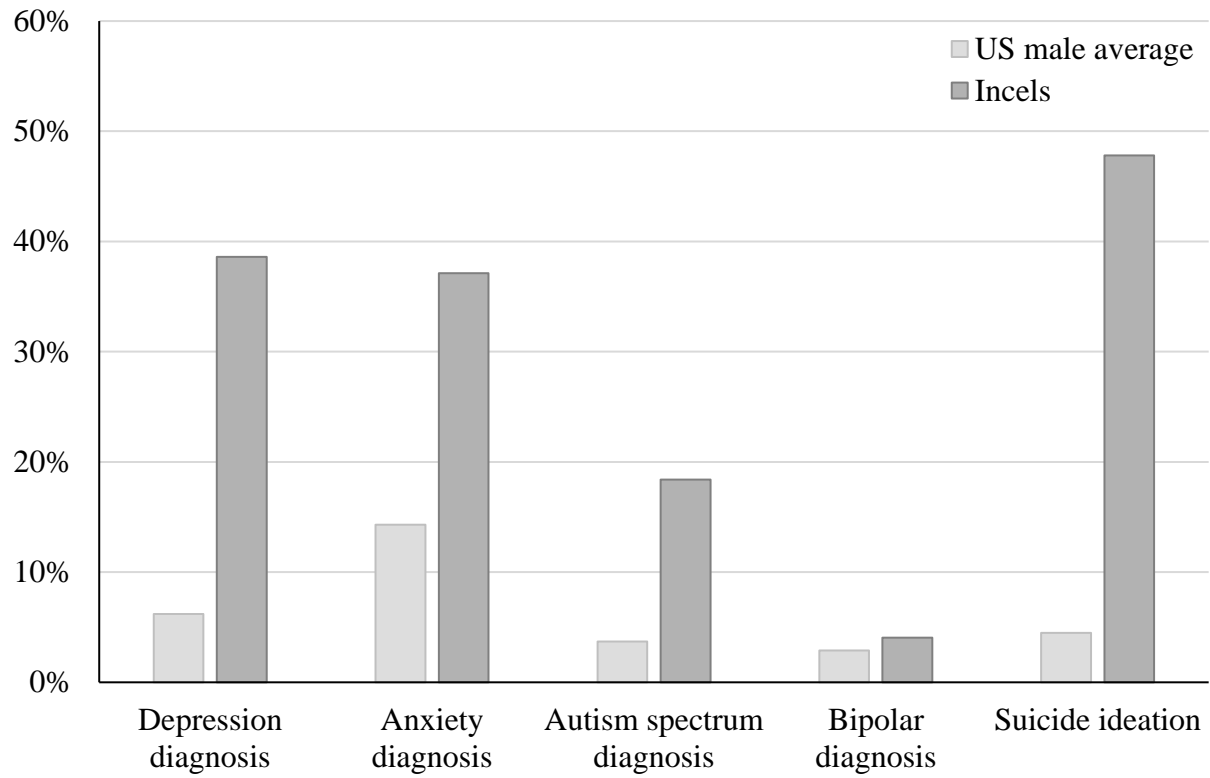vi https://www.womanstats.org/

*Figure 1*. **Prevalence of Incel mental health problems compared with US male average.**

*Note.* Incel data from [4] and US male comparison data from [1].

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