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The incel threat

During the pandemic, the male supremacist movement has grown and radicalised. Now it's moving from chat groups offline — and becomes more violent

In 2017, about six women were killed intentionally by people they knew — every hour. Of the 87,000 women killed that year, fewer than half were killed by strangers. Femicide takes different forms, and different concepts are used around the world. But while the differences between 'femicide' and 'feminicidio', for example, are not merely linguistic but also cultural, there is some agreement on significant key elements. Generally, femicide refers to 'the killing of women and girls because they are females, i.e. because of their gender'. These killings result from unequal power structures rooted in 'traditional' gender roles, customs, and mindsets. And they are the tip of the iceberg in terms of gender-based violence against women and girls.

Given this dire state of affairs, it is painful to consider that some men are trying to justify their hate and violence against women. Shortly after a 22-year-old gunman murdered five people on the streets of Plymouth in the UK, news reports emerged linking him to the obscure, largely-online 'incel' movement. 'Women are arrogant and entitled beyond belief', the killer had posted on social media shortly before the attack, describing himself as 'bitter and jealous' and seemingly confirming his allegiance to the movement.

What are *incels*?

The *incel* ideology is based on the concept of involuntary celibacy — the idea that certain physical, biological, social, and mental characteristics prevent men from having access to some kind of sexual marketplace. That marketplace, they claim, is dominated by so-called 'Chads' and 'Stacys', who exclude *incels* from participating. The result is an embittered community of male forum-dwellers who perceive themselves as social outcasts and turn their ire primarily against women, but also men and romantic couples. Unlike most acts of femicide, many *incels* do not attack women they know — in line with broader terrorist targeting

preferences, the victims are typically randomly selected.

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On the complex domestic extremism and terrorism stage, *incels* occupy a curious space. They do not appear to pose the same threat as white supremacists or Salafi-jihadists, yet they inflame fear and intense discussion. And their often-bizarre creed transcends assumed ideological boundaries. A far-right extremist who attacked a synagogue and kebab shop in Germany, for instance, repeated several tropes common in *incel* chatrooms. But regardless of how we understand them ideologically, violent elements of the movement retain a threat of terrorism against Western communities.

Why are *incels* dangerous?

Firstly, it's important to note that 2020 and 2021 were bad years for *incel* violence. Most lethal, of course, was the Plymouth attack, which killed five, but incidents in the US and Canada also claimed victims and provided reminders of the threat to North America. The most serious US case was one Arizona-based *incel* that opened fire at a mall in Glendale in May 2020 to kill couples. Three people were wounded. In Toronto, a teenager was charged with a terrorist crime after killing a woman at a massage parlour. And in Virginia, an individual blew his hand off building a bomb.

Counterterrorism analysts often reference the nexus between intent and capability — where they meet, terrorism is inevitable. With *incels*, intent often outpaces capability, and the only reasons the violence has not been worse or more visible these past two years is incompetence on the part of the attackers and good policing — but, crucially, not a lack of intent. As long as intent persists, we are at threat.

Secondly, profound pandemic-related concerns about radicalisation to extremism may prove disproportionately true in the case of *incels*. Experts are concerned that the same troubles we've all experienced during the pandemic — isolation, loneliness, boredom, and too much time spent online — will feed extremism. The reason the pandemic is so dangerous for *incel* radicalisation specifically is because, unlike with other extremist movements, those factors are actually *part of the ideology itself*.

Incels are radicalised online, and they talk incessantly about a lack of

friends and romantic prospects, about spending day after day at home alone, and about trouble in school or finding work. Misogyny, and sexual frustration, is certainly a key part of the movement and the ideology. But we must also recognise that *incel* ideology is self-reinforcing. And those feelings, emotions, and conditions that lead *incels* into radicalisation have only intensified during the pandemic. Already, most acts of *incel* violence have been murder-suicides — like in Plymouth, violent *incels* primarily aim to end their own lives, while maximising the number they take with them.

Thirdly, we're seeing an expansion to Europe. Most *incel* violence has been contained to North America, but multiple arrests in Scotland and England were followed by the tragedy in Plymouth, while Germany and Italy have also witnessed *incels* mobilising towards violence. *Incels* represent the ultimate case study in an ongoing trend in terrorism, in which movements previously assumed to exist purely domestically have instead crossed oceans and borders, accelerating along social media tentacles to radicalise newcomers in new countries. This makes them far more difficult to challenge, as they evade any traditional conceptualisations employed by national counterterrorism agencies. And this trend may intensify. There is nothing inherently 'Western' about *incel* ideology that would prevent it from expanding further, for instance, to Asia.

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Fourthly, *incels* have attracted a lot of media and counterterrorism attention, but there are other misogynist movements that are just as dangerous — and that we risk ignoring with too much focus on *incels*. The clearest example is the Atlanta shooting earlier this year, during which women were targeted at multiple Asian-majority spas. The attacker was not an *incel* but similarly combined deeply personal, sexual grievances with an ideology that justified violence against an outgroup, which in this case also included a racial dimension. The importance of tackling broader misogyny and male supremacism at large (including the myriad forms of femicide worldwide) should not be missed while our focus is on *incels*.

A terrorist threat?

There are ongoing debates about the countering of this movement, and about efforts to combat it as a 'terrorist' ideology. Canada, in particular,

has led the charge to classify *incel* violence as 'terrorism', inspiring passionate debate on the topic. The US appears to be following suit, but far more cautiously. This is one of the major questions in efforts to counter *incel* violence: does calling it 'terrorism' help or hurt?

Those questions are complicated by the fact that not all acts of *incel*-inspired violence involve equal ideological components. Here, Plymouth provides a worthwhile case study. The first recognised *incel* attack, which targeted a sorority house in Isla Vista, California, involved a gunman who published a manifesto and videos directly claiming credit for his attack and linking it to the ideology. Plymouth did not. The word 'terrorism' and the legal ramifications that might accompany it should be reserved for ideological violence that clearly targets a defined outgroup and aims to spread psychological fear — a standard that does not fit every act of violence linked to *incels*, including the attack in Plymouth, but certainly does meet some.

In any case, we face a male supremacist movement producing extremists who are as emboldened to attack as ever, will benefit from the pandemic, are expanding to Europe, and are actually just one of many male supremacist subsects. On the post-Covid-19 counterterrorism stage, then, *incels* may play a leading role.



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