

Recognizing the Violent Extremist Ideology of ‘Incels’

By Shannon Zimmerman, Luisa Ryan and David Duriesmith

In April 2018 Alek Minassian drove a van into a crowd of people in Toronto, killing ten people. A few minutes before, he had posted on Facebook, “The Incel rebellion has already begun! We will overthrow all Chads and Stacy! All hail the supreme gentleman Elliot Rodger.”

Minassian was referring to Elliot Rodger, the 22-year-old male who committed the Isla Vista, Calif., attack which killed six people in 2014. Before his rampage, Rodger had posted a ‘manifesto’ online – a lengthy tirade against the failures of modern society to provide him sexual access to women. Rodger is often portrayed in the media as the godfather of Incel ideology and is referred to as the “Supreme Gentleman” in online spaces such as Reddit and incel.me. He was the first individual to be labeled a terrorist of the alt-right by the Southern Poverty Law Center, which tracks far-right activity.¹

Minassian’s Facebook post indicated that his act was linked to a broader political ideology rooted in a toxic combination of male supremacy and white supremacy. While lone-wolf attackers who invoke anti-feminist ideas- like Minassian- are often framed as mentally ill loners, this attack was terrorist in nature and should be considered as such. Like the response to Elliot Rodger’s earlier attack at Isla Vista, media reporting after the Toronto attack quickly emphasized Minassian’s struggles with mental health and cited claims from friends that he “wasn’t a terrorist.”² This treatment fails to recognize the corrosive political ideology that underpinned Minassian’s attack and his desire to terrorize the public. These qualities should rightly define his actions as terrorism.

Who are Incels?

Incel, shorthand for ‘involuntarily celibate,’ is a violent political ideology based on a new wave of misogyny and white supremacy.³ Incel ideology is predicated on the notion that feminism has ruined society, therefore there is a need for a ‘gender revolt’ in order to reclaim a particular type of manhood based on both male and white superiority.⁴ Incels believe that by defending women’s bodily autonomy, feminism has upset the natural order which organizes society around monogamous heterosexual couplings. As a result, physically attractive young women (labeled as ‘Stacy’) now choose to sleep with the most physically desirable men (labeled as ‘Chads’).⁵ Incels often frame this pattern of behavior as a form of theft, whereby their entitled access to women’s bodies is thwarted by women’s preference for more desirable ‘Chads.’ These (mostly) young men are frustrated at a world they see as denying them power and sexual control over women’s bodies. In their eyes, they are victims of oppressive feminism, an ideology which must be overthrown, often through violence.

The diagram on the next page (taken from the subreddit r/braincell) reflects how this ideology views the world. Incel ideology presents a mythologized view that prior to the sexual revolution in the ‘60s, every man had access to a female partner; subsequent to the women’s empowerment movement, fewer and fewer men have access to a partner. They frame this shift as a profound injustice to men who cannot find a sexual partner, suggesting that society has failed to give men what they are entitled to (access to women’s bodies) and that the only recourse is violent insurrection.



Drawing the link between incels and other forms of violent extremism

There has been some debate as to whether incel attacks count as terrorism. Media reporting has often been reticent to classify these attacks as terror and some officials, including the Canadian police, refused to call the Toronto attack an act of terrorism.⁶ However, the nature of incel violence meets the requirement of the U.S. State Department’s description, which defines the term ‘terrorism’ as “*premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents.*”⁷ While incels have not yet formed organized violent groups or cells, the existing attacks have been premeditated, politically motivated and perpetrated violence against civilians. These factors clearly designate incel attacks as a form of terrorism and require incel ideology to be explored as a form of violent extremism.

At the heart of this ideology are hardened misogynistic notions of traditional gender roles. Rather than focusing on a particular religious or ethnic group, these attacks are motivated by shared beliefs about sexuality, male supremacy and the need to violently reestablish ‘traditional’ gender norms. The substantial online communities, previously congregating on the now defunct subreddit r/incel and more recently on incel.me and r/braincells subreddit, validate this world view and encourage direct action in pursuit of their goals.

Incel ideology is just one of many forms of misogynistic violence. Addressing this misogyny and the violence it produces is the most effective way to prevent some of the conditions which lead to domestic terrorist attacks. Early action will also go a long way towards addressing the core tenets of far-right ideologies, which are increasingly impacting and unsettling the American public at large.

There is an undeniable link between misogyny and violence. Experts say that domestic violence is a way for a male abuser to impose and enforce ‘traditional’ gender roles, which are based on ideas of men having control over women.⁸ The important factor here is that it is violence or threats of violence that are used to exert that control. This link starts with domestic violence but may extend far beyond the privacy of the home to include mass shootings or terrorist attacks. Recent research shows that more than 50% of the mass shootings executed in the United States between 2009 and 2016 were preceded by the shooter’s murder of a partner, ex-partner or family member.⁹ For example, James Hodgkinson, who opened fire at a GOP baseball practice, allegedly assaulted his daughter and was accused of abuse by two of his three ex-wives.¹⁰

Researchers such as Cynthia Cockburn, Rachel Pain and Sara Meger have shown the deep links between men’s sexual violence and their use of armed violence in public. In the case of incel terrorism, the links to violence are overt.¹¹ Incel discussions often explicitly connect women’s non-provision of sexual access to the need for sexually marginalized men to deploy brutal violence in the public sphere in order to defend this ‘entitlement’. While not all incels are white supremacists or terrorists, affiliates are connected to these more extreme violent expressions by a toxic view of gender relations, which provides the “linking thread, a kind of fuse, along which violence runs.”¹² Incel discussions often draw explicitly on white supremacist calls for armed insurrection to overthrow the prevailing order and restore an order based on men’s supremacy over women. The parallels between Minassian’s call for “Incel Rebellion” and white supremacists’ calls for ethno-nationalist insurrection are not coincidental.¹³ Incels who argue for an armed insurrection often use similar terminology to white supremacists in relation to the need for men to overthrow the prevailing system. Frustration with the current system, and adherence to an ideology that promotes violent solutions, not only makes incels dangerous actors in and of themselves, but also increases the probability that they will be amenable to broader extremist recruitment tactics.

The Islamic State advertises its treatment of women as a recruitment tool, showing men- particularly men from western countries- that the caliphate will allow them to restore ‘traditional’ gender norms of male dominance.¹⁴ This ideology appeals to individuals who desire to control the women in their own lives. Omar Mateen, the Pulse nightclub shooter who killed 49 people in the second deadliest mass shooting in recent American history, was loosely affiliated with ISIS. He mentally and physically abused his wife.¹⁵ This pattern fits a number of other so-called ‘lone wolf’ attacker profiles, such as Khalid Masood, the Westminster attacker; Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel, who committed the van attack in Nice; Tamerlan Tsarnaev, one of the Boston Marathon bombers, and Man Haron Monis, who carried out the Sydney Lindt café siege and has been charged with

22 counts of aggravated sexual assault.¹⁶ According to Nimmi Gowrinathan, the restrictive gender roles promoted by terrorist organizations often act as a “pull” factor for potential recruits who have pre-existing attitudes or desires in that direction. Addressing misogynistic attitudes is one of the best ways to prevent an escalation to violence.

The risk of misogyny-linked terror groups is particularly pertinent to the United States today. A 2017 survey by the Thomson Reuters Foundation found that the United States is now among the top 10 most dangerous nations for women when assessed on healthcare, discrimination, cultural traditions, sexual violence, non-sexual violence and human trafficking.¹⁷ The U.S. ranked third, tying with Syria, in regard to the danger of sexual violence including rape, sexual harassment, coerced sex and lack of justice in rape cases. The U.S. ranked sixth for non-sexual violence against women and was the only Western country to show up on the list. The other countries, in order of danger to women, were listed as India, Afghanistan, Syria, Somalia, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Yemen and Nigeria.

It may be easy to believe that incels are an extreme fringe group that do not pose a threat to national or international security. However, Incels represent just one end of a spectrum of extremist groups spanning a vast range of political ideologies, all united by militant misogyny. These groups range from white-supremacists and neo-Nazis to Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. Incels are just one aspect of a violent ideological masculinity, an ideology that is growing. Misogynist online groups, from men’s rights activists, to ‘pick up artist’ communities and Incels, have increased in number and size over recent years.¹⁸ The subreddit r/incels had roughly 40,000 members when it was shut down in 2017 for inciting violence against women.¹⁹ But incels are not confined to “one tiny bit of Reddit” rather “it’s a movement that has tens of thousands of people who visit these boards, these subreddits, which are safe places for them.”²⁰

There are arguments both for and against banning websites that promote violence against women, such as the subreddit r/incel. Some argue that these groups should be allowed to remain, as they gather promoters of violent ideology together where they might be monitored rather than forcing them to scatter, only to grow and proliferate. However, if allowed to remain, these online communities permit both violent content and norms to flourish and possibly be enacted in the real world.²¹ Reddit, the site which hosted then banned the subreddit r/incel, has recently established policies that prohibit content that “encourages, glorifies, incites or calls for violence or physical harm against an individual or group of people.” The platform has also been clamping down on pages which are dedicated to far-right groups, banning two such groups for sharing personal information without permission as a form of harassment, also known as ‘doxing.’²² The incel Reddit thread was just one of countless online forums, blogs

and networks collectively called the ‘Manosphere,’ which focus on issues of men’s rights and male supremacy where incels, and those with similar ideologies, gather. These forums act as an echo chamber reifying and amplifying extremist beliefs. It should be noted that since the closing of r/incel the community has moved to other subreddits, such as r/braincells, or to dedicated sites like <https://incels.me/>.

Ideologies based on ideas of domination through fear facilitate violent acts and should be considered as a form of terrorism. Recently, the Southern Poverty Law Center added male supremacy to the list of ideologies it tracks on its ‘hate map,’ placing it alongside white nationalist, racist skinhead, neo-Nazi, neo-nationalist and other hate groups.²³ Just as white supremacist violence is now well-recognized as a form of terrorism, it is important that male supremacist attacks be similarly acknowledged.

Policy implications

Crafting and supporting policies that provide alternatives to violent white supremacist and misogynistic rhetoric/actions is an effective method to increase both domestic and international security. Understanding the complex interactions between domestic violence, misogyny, alt-right ideology, and terrorism opens up several new avenues for preventative policy responses.

Address the ideology

- Address misogynistic ideology with the same seriousness as other forms of violent extremism. There has been a tendency both in media reporting and government responses to treat incel attacks as purely a result of mental illness or random acts of violence. Incel ideology must be treated as the form of violent extremist thought that it is, and relevant existing laws and policies should be applied. The role of incel ideology in promoting ‘lone-wolf’ attacks means that it requires a similar response to the promotion of jihadi or neo-Nazi ideology online.
- Encourage and support policies that identify and sanction speech that is intended to incite violence or harm against an individual or group of people, including that which is based on gender. Such policies, where they already exist, need to be enforced. Gender-based threats need to be taken as seriously as threats based on religion and ethnicity.

Act on early warning signs

The speed at which people radicalize makes radicalization difficult to track. However, those that engage in terrorist attacks often have long histories of violence, particularly domestic violence. If mass shootings and terrorist attacks are connected to domestic or family violence, there are warning signs that, if acknowledged, can be used to help prevent future violence.

- Strengthen domestic violence laws to prevent abusers from accessing weapons, including mechanisms to remove guns from individuals who have exhibited dangerous behavior. This would include closing background check loopholes which allow individuals prohibited from buying guns to purchase them.
- Ensure the application of domestic violence laws and facilitate the creation of laws which prohibit violence based on gender.
- Craft policies which identify and address violent behaviors rather than profiling individuals based on race or religion, tactics which only further alienate individuals. Policies can acknowledge domestic violence as an important precursor to larger violent acts.
- Acts of domestic violence need to be understood as a security threat rather than a 'personal' matter, and thus treated accordingly. This includes supporting domestic violence survivors and prosecuting perpetrators before they can harm others.

Extremist ideologies advocating violence of any kind are a domestic security concern. Holistically addressing these ideologies and the environments in which they thrive is an effective approach to preventing both large and small scale violence targeted at specific groups, be those groups identified by race, religion, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, or other.

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