

Why you should care about incel violence

Dal prof finds extreme misogyny in large study of online forum messages



Dalhousie sociology professor Michael Halpin completed one of the largest studies on incels to date. He is seen here in his office on Tuesday.

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Michael Halpin wants you to start worrying about incels.

The Dalhousie sociology professor first got interested in right-wing extremist groups in 2016 after the election of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency. This quest eventually led him to [studying online forums](#) for “involuntary celibates” or incels.

Incels are a loosely organized group of men on the internet who define themselves by their inability to attract sexual partners and often hold extremely misogynistic beliefs. Some incel groups even advocate mass violence.

Halpin said that the threat from incels is not just from extreme cases.

“Knowing that there is a community of men who were wishing you to be murdered or sexually assaulted is absolutely like a system level, misogynistic problem, whether or not they act on that,” he said.

History of ‘incel’

The term ‘incel’ was originally coined by a queer woman in Toronto named Alana who had difficulty dating due to anxiety and shyness. After starting her first relationship in her mid-20s, she started an online support group for people who faced the same difficulties she had.

Originally, the group had men and women, straight and queer members, but it was slowly taken over by men, who Alana described on her website [Love not Anger](#) as “looking for simple formulas to ‘get a girl.’” In 2000, Alana left the group.

Over the years, incel forums became less of a place for dating advice and more of one for straight men to express their frustration, sometimes violently.

In 2014, Elliot Rodger, the 22-year-old son of a movie producer, killed six people in a shooting and stabbing spree in Isla Vista, Calif. In 2018, Alek Minassian killed 10 people and injured 16 by running them over with a van in Toronto.

Both men were active on incel forums and listed their incel status as reasons they committed mass violence.

Incels were officially [designated as a violent extremist group](#) by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service in 2019.

Halpin said on the most popular incel forum in 2021, it is common for men to say that women deserve to be sexually assaulted or murdered.

Halpin worked with graduate student Kayla Preston and computer scientist Finlay Maguire to analyze 9,602 online comments on the most popular forum for incels. He said he believes the study is the largest on incels to date.

Blackpill, Chads, foids

Most incels believe in a set of ideas they call the “blackpill,” the belief that women only care about looks and will always date the most attractive man they can.

They argue that dating apps like Tinder make it easier for alpha males, who they call Chads, to date multiple women at the same time, monopolizing the market on the commodities of women’s bodies and time.

Taking the blackpill means accepting that you have no chance of ever having sex with a woman.

“They’re blaming technology for the fact that there’s incels. But they’re not really blaming technology, they’re actually blaming women,” Halpin said.

In the threads that Halpin studied, women were described as cruel, calculating and unfeeling “foids” or female androids. Other times, they were described as animalistic and without self-control, simultaneously ruling the world and having sex with dogs.

Halpin also found that incels were more diverse than he initially guessed, in terms of race, ethnicity and socio-economic status. Some incels reported attending elite universities and many were from non-white backgrounds.

“I think there’s a kind of stereotype of incels being basement-dwelling, neck-bearded white guys, with no jobs and no university education, but that’s not what we found at all,” he said.

“You can have an avowed white nationalist in a conversation with someone who’s talking about white privilege.”

Pessimistic view of the future

Sarah Daly is a professor at Saint Vincent College in Pennsylvania who has interviewed incels.

“A lot of the men that I’ve interviewed expressed these really negative life experiences and kind of this negative pattern of thinking, this very kind of nihilistic, pessimistic view of their lives and what their futures look like,” she said.

She said that self-selection was probably at play in [her study](#), as most incels would be reluctant to talk to an Asian-American female professor, but that the men she talked to were “not overtly misogynistic.”

One man quoted in her study told her, “I don’t hate women for not dating me. I can’t blame them. Why would they date an ugly man?”

In [another study](#), Daly analyzed 80 online suicide notes by incels. She said that while she doesn’t condone the things that incels say, incel self-harm is much more prevalent than incel violence directed outwards.

“If people can look beyond the overtly hateful messages, we can also see that there are so many discussions about self-harm, depression and suicide,” she said.

Content like trolling and shit-posting can act as a way for men who feel emasculated in real life to assert more dominance online, Daly said.

Halpin said that whether incels act out their frustrations violently on other people or not, they pose a threat that can't be ignored.

"They definitely have had some really negative experiences and they have really negative views of their own body," he said.

"At the same time, it's paired with just incredible amount of hostility towards women. And so it's hard to have sympathy for a group of people who really do blame women for all their problems and want to see women degraded and suffer."

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