



## Combating Constrictive Gender Ideology-Driven Violence in Virtual Communities

**Meghan Scarlott**, CUNY John Jay College of Criminal Justice

**Elliot Rodger** was 22 years old in May of 2014 when he shared a 141-page autobiographical document online that detailed his upbringing, mental health, his loathing of women, and his frustration about his virginity. He then went on to kill six people in Isla Vista, California, before turning his gun on himself. In a video posted prior to the attack, Rodger described his rampage as a “Day of Retribution” against society for “denying” him sex and love; he explicitly aimed to murder women who collectively, he thought, had unjustly withheld sexual and romantic attention from him, alongside men who had unjustly received it instead of him.

To the average American, these actions were and are obviously aberrant—but to a niche internet community known as involuntary celibates, or incels, Rodger’s attack and his misogynistic motivations prompted recognition and celebration. The incident eventually earned him the moniker of “the original incel” and “supreme gentleman,” whose autobiographical document and video is regarded as a kind of incel manifesto. In a general sense, **incels** are defined as men who are excluded, by perception and in reality, from sexual or romantic relations with women. And while only a very small percentage of the total population self-identifies as incels, the ideas about gender that this group champions are more pervasive than one might think. Policy interventions that combat the spread of violent, misogynistic rhetoric espoused in online incel communities and that better address the mental health of men who are predisposed to accept and perpetuate these ideas—and the violence they spur—are not only possible, but critical.

### How Online Misogyny Instigates Extremist Security Threats

Self-identified incels connect via online forums, such as reddit and 4chan. Many of their anti-feminist beliefs and the discourse on the forums normalize violence and prime users for radicalization. Rodger’s attack is but one example of violence motivated by incel-related ideas and rhetoric: **Armando Hernandez Jr.’s** 2020 mall shooting in Arizona, **Scott Paul Beierle’s** 2018 attack on a Tallahassee yoga studio, and the 2018 Toronto van attack by **Alek Minassian**—who had corresponded with Rodger—were all inspired by incel ideology propagated online.

There is a strong connection between expressions of misogyny and the propensity for violence; misogynistic acts are a component of the **ideology, political identity, and political economy of most extremist groups**. In fact, individuals who support violence against women were found to be **three times more likely to support violent extremism**. It is unsurprising then that the violent and misogynistic content that dominates incel forums solidifies anti-feminist beliefs and normalizes violent ideology, with incel men being found to have a **slightly higher incidence of violent ideation** compared to non-incel men. The normalization and casual discussion of violence can prime individuals for further **radicalization**, particularly in relation to far-right extremism. Membership and association with multiple online or offline communities that celebrate violent means of change can put individuals at further risk for acting on these ideas.

### Policy Recommendations for Intervention

While the majority of men who take part in incel forums will not lash out the way Rodger did, the combination of poor mental health—widespread within the incel community—and rhetoric that normalizes violence can lead some to carry out physical violence. Legislation that addresses real-world attacks is paramount, but so too are policies and interventions that may help to thwart incel violence by addressing virtual threats and mental health concerns. Policy addressing online and physical incel violence is rooted in hate speech and hate crime statutes; expanding the parameters of this type of legislation so that it more comprehensively covers both violence types could better address threats from the incel community. To prevent real-world violence from occurring in the first place, policymakers and mental health professionals can consider proactive

interventions that address risk factors seen in many incels, including the following based in part on [intervention policies for young men at risk for radicalization](#):

- **Identify other risk factors for violence (i.e., previous offenses, access to weapons) that can make an individual more likely to engage in misogynistic extremism.** Evaluating additional risk factors will help create a better understanding of a person's actual risk of acting out violently.
- **Note mental health or behavioral issues, and provide therapy or psychological intervention that is appropriate for the individual.** Many individuals who identify as incels suffer from mental health symptoms that can contribute, along with other factors, to their violently acting out if not addressed. Psychological interventions (e.g., cognitive behavioral therapy, talk therapy) that are best suited for an individual can help to effectively treat the behavioral factors related to violence.
- **Monitor online communities the individual is engaged with, and understand what beliefs or ideologies resonate most with the individual.** Understanding an individual's specific beliefs, and why they might be discussing them, may help tailor interventions to address the most relevant core beliefs related to the risk of violence.

Notably, the above suggestions focus on an individualized approach. Addressing individuals' poor mental health and tailoring psychological interventions to better speak to men who are enmeshed in anti-feminist communities can lessen their risk of acting out violently against women and society. However, this does little to combat the root causes driving men to engage with these communities in the first place. These interventions are one piece of a larger puzzle when it comes to interventions, and consideration of larger societal and institutional issues that make the incel community appealing to some men will be vital for other forms of intervention or policy.