

Excerpt from “Our Incel Problem”

How a support group for the dateless became one of the internet’s most dangerous subcultures.

By Zack Beauchamp | Vox.com

In the late 1990s, a lonely teenager on the West Coast fired up his dial-up modem to find someone to talk to. He was a shy kid, too introverted to feel fully comfortable in the real world, and he logged on to the early internet’s bare-bones web forums for a sense of connection. There he found friends: other people who were awkward in real life, particularly when it came to sex and dating.

The group eventually became a community, one that began using a phrase to describe their romantic troubles — “involuntary celibacy.” Later the term would get shortened: “incel.”

The teenager, now a man who uses the handle “ReformedIncel” to keep his internet history out of his offline life, recalls the online incel world of the 1990s and 2000s fondly. It was a welcoming place, one where men who didn’t know how to talk to women could ask the community’s female members for advice (and vice versa). It was, he told me, “kind of an SJW [social justice warrior] community.”

In April 2018, about 20 years after the early incel community coalesced, a college student in Toronto named Sohe Chung decided to walk to the library. It wasn’t a short walk — the subway would have been faster — but Chung and her roommate, So Ra, [wanted to enjoy](#) the sunshine.

Chung and So never made it to the library. On the way there, a van hopped the curb onto the sidewalk and slammed into pedestrians. Chung was one of 10 killed; So was one of 16 wounded.

The van’s driver was a self-described incel — but the community today would not be recognizable to those who built it decades earlier. Today’s incels are almost entirely men and boys who pollute their online forums with posts blaming women for their sexless lives. Some posters even celebrated Chung’s killer the day of the attack, [calling for other incels to follow up](#) with “acid attacks” and “mass rape.” What was once an open-minded support group had degenerated into a place where praise for mass killers was tolerated, even normalized.

“Rage,” ReformedIncel says, “has completely taken over.”

In the year since Toronto, I’ve followed the incel movement closely, reading its websites and subreddits regularly. I’ve spoken with more than a dozen current and former incel forum posters, including two site administrators, and acquired logs of an incel chat room from around the time of the Toronto attack.

What I’ve found is more than just a community twisted into a grotesque parody of its original shape. I’ve found a story of how the deepest prejudices in a society can take purchase in new settings due to technology — transforming not only online spaces but real lives and potentially even the trajectory of our politics.

Over the past two decades, the incel community, which numbers somewhere in the tens of thousands, has fallen under the sway of a profoundly sexist ideology that they call “the blackpill.” It amounts to a fundamental rejection of women’s sexual emancipation, labeling women shallow, cruel creatures who will choose only the most attractive men if given the choice.

Taken to its logical extreme, the blackpill can lead to violence. The mass media has focused on the risk of more mass killings like Toronto and [others before it](#), and that is indeed a serious concern. But the focus on incels as potential killers risks missing a more subtle threat: that they will commit acts of everyday violence ranging from harassment to violent assault, or simply make the women in their lives miserable.

Yet incels are not merely an isolated subculture, disconnected from the outside world. They are a dark reflection of a set of social values about women that is common, if not dominant, in broader Western society. The intersection between this age-old misogyny and new information technologies is reshaping our politics and culture in a way we may only dimly understand — and may not be prepared to confront.

Who are the incels?

Abe (not his real name) has dealt with loneliness for a long time. Nineteen today, he still recalls a ninth birthday at Chuck E. Cheese's where none of the classmates he invited showed up. His mom cried while he distracted himself with arcade games.

In young adulthood, Abe developed a crush on his female best friend. When he finally got the nerve to ask her out, she said yes, and they dated for a month. But during that time, she cheated on Abe with her ex and eventually got engaged to him.

It was a crushing blow, and Abe turned to the internet for support. He found incel communities on Reddit, ones that helped reaffirm his belief that his looks were responsible for his terrible dating experience. The subreddits, he tells me, showed him "how manipulative some women can be when seeking validation" — that they are, in his words, "emotional tampons."

Abe still wishes he had a girlfriend. He writes about wanting simple things, like baking at home with a partner or holding hands while watching a movie. But he doesn't have much hope that'll happen to him anytime soon. He spends his time posting near daily on Reddit, frequenting subreddits like r/Braincels (currently one of two main incel forums) and r/ForeverAlone.

"Of course, nobody knows what will happen in the future," he tells me. "But it looks pretty bleak for me romantically."

Abe's experiences seem to be relatively typical for incels. They are overwhelmingly young men and boys with a history of isolation and rejection; they turn to the internet to make sense of their pain.

While there is no rigorous scientific study on incel demographics — the community is deeply hostile to outsiders, particularly researchers and journalists — their forums have conducted informal surveys on the demographics of their users. Combining this data with my interviews of incels like Abe (all of whom I've quoted under pseudonyms) has helped me put together a rough picture of your ordinary incel.

An informal poll of 1,267 Braincels users found that about 90 percent of forum participants were under the age of 30. The users are almost all men — women are banned on sight, but a handful do sneak in — and roughly 80 percent live in Europe or North America.

Despite drawing users largely from majority-white countries, Braincels has an ethnically diverse set of contributors; 55 percent of the site's user base is white, with significant percentages of posters who self-identify as East Asian, South Asian, black, and Latino. A poll that ran on incels.co, the largest incel site outside of Reddit, came out with similar numbers on their user base's age, race, and geographic distribution.

Incels seem drawn to Braincels and incels.co based on a sense that their looks or other personal traits — many users say they have autism — have ruined their romantic chances. They commonly share stories of personal trauma.

Miguel, who's roughly 20 years old, described a childhood that destroyed his confidence with women.

"I was bullied heavily, which led me to develop severe anxiety and self-hatred. Because of my anxiety, I lack confidence, something women pick up on and [that] labels me a loser," he tells me. "Most of the incels I know are around 16 to 30 years old. They have either been bullied, have autism, or just conventionally unattractive faces."

John, a 30-year-old incel from New Jersey, tried pretty much everything he could think of to help himself succeed in the dating market. He works out regularly, eats vegetarian, and spends time reading up on fashion so he can try to dress well. He's tried online dating for years and let some of his female friends set him up on dates.

But very few women have responded to his messages on dating apps. And when his female friends described him to their girlfriends, they would never describe him as “attractive” or even “cute.” Eventually, John concluded, he was just ugly — and there was nothing that he could do, no way he could eat or dress to fix that.

Like many incels, he was drawn to the community because he felt they were the only people who understood his experience. Other forum users were people he could commiserate with, virtual friends who swapped jokes and memes that helped everyone get through the day.

“Most people will not be in my situation, so they can’t relate. They can’t comprehend someone being so ugly that they can’t get a girlfriend,” John tells me. “What I noticed was how similar my situation was to the other guys. I thought I was the only one in the world so inept at dating.”

It’s hard not to feel for people like Abe or John. All of us have, at one point, experienced our share of rejection or loneliness. What makes the incel world scary is that it takes these universal experiences and transmutes the pain they cause into unbridled, misogynistic rage.

<https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/4/16/18287446/incel-definition-reddit>