

# Two Pandemics: Evaluating and Forecasting Incel Reactions to COVID-19<sup>1</sup>

Avery D. Schmitz

The George Washington University Program on Extremism

## *Abstract*

The purpose of this paper is to draw attention to the growing threat of incel violence, which has been exacerbated by COVID-19. For incels, the crisis has ushered in broad psychological, social, and organizational changes. Deteriorating mental health conditions, a dramatic growth in internet usership, and an increasingly active ecosystem of right-wing extremist groups will fuel elevated rates of incel-motivated violence as the pandemic subsides. Governments around the world should confront this burgeoning threat by funding initiatives to curb extremist ideologies in schools, while leveraging existing online communities to provide cognitive behavioural therapy to radicalized individuals.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Incel, Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremism, Mental Health, Internet

## *Introduction*

The global spread of COVID-19 in early 2020 marked a new chapter of violent extremism. In some cases, the pandemic has directly aided terrorist organizations like the Islamic State, which capitalized on the volatility to regain some control in Iraq and Syria.<sup>2</sup> For politically unstable states like Libya and Yemen, COVID-19 has contributed to deteriorating economic and humanitarian crises and civil unrest.<sup>3</sup> In the United States, the coronavirus compounded social, racial, and economic grievances, which drove high rates of violence from right-wing militias like the Oath Keepers and Three Percenters in 2020.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Seamus Hughes, Joana Cook, Devorah Margolin, and Matteo Carrabba for their encouragement and advice. Thank you to my family for contributing their editing skills and supporting me throughout this project.

<sup>2</sup>Magid, Pasha. “Islamic State Aims for Comeback amid Virus-Expedited U.S. Withdrawal.” *Foreign Policy*, 6 April 2020. (accessed 10 April 2021), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/06/iraq-islamic-state-comeback-coronavirus-us-withdrawal/>.

<sup>3</sup>International Committee of the Red Cross, “Libya: COVID-19 and Conflict Collide, Deepening Humanitarian Crisis,” International Committee of the Red Cross, 20 August 2020, (accessed 10 April 2021), <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/libya-covid-19-and-conflict-collide-libya-deepening-humanitarian-crisis>. (accessed 11 April 2021); Omer Karasapan, “Yemen and COVID-19: The Pandemic Exact Its Devastating Toll,” The Brookings Institution, 15 June 2020, (accessed 10 April 2021), <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2020/06/15/yemen-and-covid-19-the-pandemic-exacts-its-devastating-toll/>.

<sup>4</sup>Jones, Seth, and Catrina Doxsee. “The War Comes Home: The Evolution of Domestic Terrorism in the United States.” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 22 October 2020. (Accessed 10 April 2021), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/war-comes-home-evolution-domestic-terrorism-united-states>.

Looking beyond the activities of associated far-right groups, the coronavirus pandemic has had clear and quantifiable impacts on the involuntary celibate, or incel, community. From increasing interaction with extremist content online, to driving elevated rates of depression, the COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally altered the landscape of violent inceldom. The community may continue to grow as a result of these changes, and the risk to the public will increase.

Incel violence is not a new phenomenon. On 23 May 2014, Elliot Roger perpetrated the first widely recognized incel-motivated attack at the University of California at Santa Barbara. Since then, there have been at least 65 victims of incel violence across North America and Western Europe. Ten of the 13 attacks recorded since 2014 have occurred in the past four years. The American-born ideology has taken root in Canada, provoking attacks in Alberta and Ontario provinces. Indeed, violent inceldom has become a global threat, as demonstrated in the 2020 Hanau shooting, which left 11 people dead and was the first reported incident outside of North America.

This paper will consider the effects of COVID-19 on incel communities in the United States and abroad. Following this brief introduction, a review of relevant literature discusses current scholarship regarding incel ideology and use of the internet. Direct and indirect impacts of the crisis are then evaluated, emphasizing social isolation and changes in incel behaviour online. To forecast incel-motivated violence resulting from COVID-19, this paper analyses various psychological factors, heightened internet usership, and the intersection of grievances as evidence of growing volatility. Finally, this paper raises concrete policy recommendations to mitigate this constantly evolving threat.

As with many crises, the coronavirus has fostered instability and enabled the proliferation of violent networks around the world. As environmental factors and extremist threats evolve, preventative strategies must be implemented accordingly. This paper seeks to evaluate how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted violent incels and propose policy solutions to mitigate emergent risks. Finally, this may serve as a framework for evaluating the impacts of future public health crises on domestic violent extremists.

### ***Contextualizing the Threat of Incel Violence***

One of the fastest-growing threats to global security is that of right-wing political movements.<sup>5</sup> Joined with many of these movements are ideologically motivated violent extremist (IMVE) actors, who have recently become more active, according to FBI Director Christopher Wray.<sup>6</sup> Sometimes overlooked when discussing IMVEs are violent incel communities, whose activity has increased in previous years.<sup>7</sup>

Involuntary celibates, widely referred to as incels, are individuals who ascribe to an ideology which capitalizes on followers' lack of romantic or sexual companionship.<sup>8</sup> Alex

---

<sup>5</sup> *Worldwide Threats to the Homeland*, House of Representatives, 116<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, 2 (2020) (testimony of Christopher Wray).

<sup>6</sup> *Worldwide Threats*, House of Representatives, 116<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, 2 (2020) (testimony of Christopher Miller).

<sup>7</sup> Bruce Hoffman, Jacob Ware, and Ezra Shapiro, "Assessing the Threat of Incel Violence," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 43, no. 7 (19 April 2020): 569–72, (accessed 10 April 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610x.2020.1751459>.

<sup>8</sup> Taub, Amanda. "On Social Media's Fringes, Growing Extremism Targets Women." *The New York Times*, 9 May 2018. (Accessed 10 April 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/09/world/americas/incels-toronto-attack.html>.

DiBranco explains that, while its own entity, inceldom is predicated on values which mirror those of far-right organizations such as the Oath Keepers and Three Percenters.<sup>9</sup> Central to the ideology are themes of misogyny, patriarchy and white supremacy.<sup>10</sup> Women, minorities, and immigrants are scapegoated for the ‘dispossession and oppression of white men’, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC).<sup>11</sup> According to a 2019 study by Farrell et al., incel communities have directly contributed to a steady, quantifiable increase in misogynistic rhetoric since 2015.<sup>12</sup>

Incel communities and many far-right organizations operate in similar ecosystems and frequently feed off each other’s rhetoric.<sup>13</sup> This propinquity is most blatantly demonstrated by the large number of influential ideologues who contribute to both narratives, such as Christopher Cantwell and Matt Forney.<sup>14</sup> While the vast majority of incels do not harbour violent intentions, as researcher Mia Bloom notes, the lethality of extremists who do subscribe to inceldom has been manifested in the recent attacks in Santa Barbara, Parkland, Toronto, and Hanau.<sup>15</sup>

Incels interact almost exclusively online, a feature which distinguishes them from other extremist communities.<sup>16</sup> They have found safe haven on websites such as Reddit, 4chan, and 8chan.<sup>17</sup> Many incel forums are relatively small, with fewer than 100,000 users.<sup>18</sup> Referred to as the ‘manosphere’, this ecosystem allows ideas to spread with unparalleled speed.<sup>19</sup> A study conducted by Gothard et al. indicates an increase in activity on sites which promote inceldom in recent years.<sup>20</sup> The same team identified a pattern wherein moderators disband groups (citing dissemination of hateful, explicit, and violent content) and new forums quickly appear to replace them.<sup>21</sup> Rather than organizing in static groups, these online communities are dynamic and decentralized, which protects participants’ identities and the efficacy of these virtual spaces.

---

<sup>9</sup> DiBranco, Alex. “Male Supremacist Terrorism as a Rising Threat.” *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*, 10 February 2020. (Accessed 10 April 2021), <https://icct.nl/publication/male-supremacist-terrorism-as-a-rising-threat/>.

<sup>10</sup> Mark Pitcavage, “Surveying the Landscape of the American Far Right,” (The George Washington University Program on Extremism), (accessed 10 April 2021), [https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Surveying%20The%20Landscape%20of%20the%20American%20Far%20Right\\_0.pdf](https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Surveying%20The%20Landscape%20of%20the%20American%20Far%20Right_0.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center, “Male Supremacy,” 2017, (accessed 10 April 2021), <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/male-supremacy>.

<sup>12</sup> Farrell, Tracie, Miriam Fernandez, Jakub Novotny, and Harith Alani. “Exploring Misogyny across the Manosphere in Reddit.” In *WebSci '19 Proceedings of the 10th ACM Conference on Web Science*, 87–96. Open Research Online, 2019. (accessed 10 April 2021), <http://oro.open.ac.uk/61128/1/WebScience139.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center, *Male Supremacy*.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Mia Bloom, How Extremists Are Exploiting COVID-19, interview by Steve Paikin, *TVOntario*, 13 May 2020, (accessed 10 April 2021), <https://www.tvo.org/video/how-extremists-are-exploiting-covid-19>.

<sup>16</sup> Hoffman, Ware, and Shapiro, Assessing the Threat of Incel Violence, 568.

<sup>17</sup> Bruce Hoffman and Jacob Ware, “Incels: America’s Newest Domestic Terrorism Threat,” *Lawfare*, 12 January 2020, (accessed 10 April 2021), <https://www.lawfareblog.com/incels-americas-newest-domestic-terrorism-threat>.

<sup>18</sup> Emma Grey Ellis, “Reddit’s ‘Manosphere’ and the Challenge of Quantifying Hate,” *WIRED*, 10 July 2019, (accessed 10 April 2021), <https://www.wired.com/story/misogyny-reddit-research/>.

<sup>19</sup> Farrell, Fernandez, Novotny, and Alani, Exploring Misogyny across the Manosphere in Reddit, 87-96.

<sup>20</sup> Gothard, Kelly, Dodds, Peter S., and Danforth, Christopher M., “Exploring Incel Language and Subreddit Activity on Reddit” (Thesis, 2020) (accessed 10 April 2021), <https://cdanfort.w3.uvm.edu/research/kelly-gothard-undergraduate-thesis.pdf>.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

### ***Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Incels***

COVID-19 has significantly impacted followers of incelism. This article proceeds to outline how the pandemic has altered their self-images and introduced grievances which are compounded by their ideological tenets. Other impacts discussed include heightened sentiments of isolation brought on by lockdowns and quarantines, and a shift in how incels employ the internet as a tool for interaction and indoctrination.

### ***The Cognitive Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Incels***

The cognitive effects of the coronavirus pandemic on the incel community are far-reaching, with serious implications. Initially, incels viewed certain public health measures (such as mask mandates and social distancing) as equalizers. They felt that, with the introduction of mask mandates, they might find a romantic or sexual partner given that attractive people would be required to obscure their faces.<sup>22</sup> More broadly, COVID-19 has ‘fueled [sic] self-pity, extremist fantasies, and hostility towards attractive men and women’.<sup>23</sup>

The implementations of lockdowns, for many in the incel community, validated their lifestyle and were cause for celebration.<sup>24</sup> In March and April of 2020, many incel forums saw increased user activity by individuals excited that the rest of the population would be forced to abstain from physical intimacy.<sup>25</sup> Prior to being banned in March of 2020, one popular Reddit forum, entitled r/ShortCels, had attracted approximately 12,500 followers and was receiving well over 350 comments per day.<sup>26</sup>

The diffusion of various grievances stemming from COVID-19 through online forums has altered existing belief systems and stoked resentment. Mindful of the link between incel and far-right communities, economic downturn caused by the pandemic emerged as a point of dissatisfaction within incel circles.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, disdain for government overreach intensified as agencies and officials responded to the pandemic.<sup>28</sup> Many of these issues were created or exacerbated by the pandemic and may have prompted some to engage with or adopt a more

---

<sup>22</sup> Mia Bloom, How Extremists Are Exploiting COVID-19.

<sup>23</sup> Anh V. Vu, “The Pandemic as Incels See It” (Cambridge Cybercrime Centre, 4 April 2020), (accessed 10 April 2021), [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Anh-Vu-67/publication/344071293\\_The\\_Pandemic\\_as\\_Incels\\_see\\_it/links/5f50cd29299bf13a319a3a19/The-Pandemic-as-Incels-see-it.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Anh-Vu-67/publication/344071293_The_Pandemic_as_Incels_see_it/links/5f50cd29299bf13a319a3a19/The-Pandemic-as-Incels-see-it.pdf).

<sup>24</sup> Mia Bloom, How Extremists Are Exploiting COVID-19.

<sup>25</sup> Sarah Manavis, “Incels Are Celebrating Lockdown Because Attractive People Can’t Have Casual Sex,” *NewStatesman*, 24 March 2020, (accessed 10 April 2021), <https://www.newstatesman.com/science-tech/coronavirus/2020/03/incels-celebrating-lockdown-casual-sex-chad-stacy-4chan-reddit>.; Garth Davies, Edith Wu, and Richard Frank, “A Witch’s Brew of Grievances: The Potential Effects of COVID-19 on Radicalization to Violent Extremism,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, May 10, 2021, (accessed 23 June 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610x.2021.1923188>.

<sup>26</sup> Subreddit Stats, “Subreddit Stats - Statistics for Every Subreddit,” 2021, (accessed 10 April 2021), <https://subredditstats.com/r/shortcels>.

<sup>27</sup> Mia Bloom, How Extremists Are Exploiting COVID-19.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

extreme version of incelism.<sup>29</sup> Through discussion of shared grievances, more individuals operating within the right-wing ecosystem will likely become involved with incel ideology.

### ***The Impacts of Social Isolation from COVID-19 Lockdowns on Incels***

The COVID-19 pandemic catalysed an unprecedented level of social isolation with the implementation of lockdowns and mask mandates around the globe. The loneliness and isolation already felt by many incels has become more potent as a result of these precautions. It is widely known that social connections are vital for one's well-being.<sup>30</sup> Both interpersonal and romantic relationships can be resources for navigating life experiences and have been shown to improve mental health.<sup>31</sup> Isolation of any form furthers susceptibility to adopting extremist views, meaning that certain coronavirus precautions will increase the likelihood of radicalization.<sup>32</sup> Living under unprecedented social distancing measures, incels could become further indoctrinated through increased access to online communities prompted by social isolation.

### ***Inceldom and the Internet During COVID-19***

Reliant on the internet for interaction and indoctrination, the COVID-19 pandemic has helped incels reach a wider audience. As previously stated, incel communities operate almost exclusively online, a reality which has not been altered by the onset of the coronavirus. The internet has become a crucial asset, guaranteeing the growth of these virtual groups and their rapid spread across countries and continents.

Due to heightened internet usership since the implementation of lockdowns, IMVE content will be consumed more widely, facilitating greater integration between incel and right-wing circles.<sup>33</sup> To this end, digital echo chambers will play a key role. When exposed exclusively to the views of like-minded users, individuals may become further indoctrinated, and their violent potential could increase.<sup>34</sup> In addition, the intersection of grievances (such as the economic downturn and government overreach) will likely promote interaction across ideological lines. It is probable that the right-wing ecosystem will expand as a result. The

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.; Emma F. Thomas, Craig McGarty, and Winnifred Louis, "Social Interaction and Psychological Pathways to Political Engagement and Extremism," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 44, no. 1 (4 October 2013): 15–22, (accessed 10 April 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.1988>.

<sup>30</sup> John T. Cacioppo and William Patrick, *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2009).

<sup>31</sup> December Maxwell et al., "A Short Story of a Lonely Guy": A Qualitative Thematic Analysis of Involuntary Celibacy Using Reddit," *Sexuality & Culture* 24, no. 4 (25 March 2020): 1853–54, (accessed 10 April 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-020-09724-6>.

<sup>32</sup> Natasha Wood, "Adventures in Solitude: The Link between Social Isolation and Violent Extremism" (Master's Thesis, 2020), (accessed 10 April 2021), <http://d-scholarship.pitt.edu/38639/>.

<sup>33</sup> Debbie Ging, "Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere," *Men and Masculinities* 22, no. 4 (10 May 2017): 638–57, (accessed 10 April 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184x17706401>.; Mark Beech, "COVID-19 Pushes up Internet Use 70% and Streaming More than 12%, First Figures Reveal," *Forbes*, 25 March 2020, (accessed 10 April 2021), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/markbeech/2020/03/25/covid-19-pushes-up-internet-use-70-streaming-more-than-12-first-figures-reveal/?sh=2851fe593104>.

<sup>34</sup> C.M. Kelshall, N. Archutowski, and S. Meyers, *Decoded: Understanding the Post-COVID-19 Security Landscape Using Structured Models, Approaches, and Analytic Techniques* (Vancouver: Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies Vancouver, 2020), 37–47, (accessed 10 April 2021), <https://casivancouver.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/DECODED-2020.08.21-WEB.pdf>.

internet is a dangerous weapon which will change the landscape of IMVE in the wake of COVID-19.

### ***Forecasting Incel Violence Resultant from the COVID-19 Pandemic***

The coronavirus pandemic will likely catalyse an increase in incel-motivated attacks. COVID-19 has aided radicalization processes, provided justification for political violence, and broadened extremists' networks. Considering how these factors could exacerbate volatility will lend credence to the assertion. The psychological toll of the pandemic, including heightened levels of stress and depression, will likely contribute to the growth of violent inceldom. Individuals spending more time online as a result of lockdowns may become more susceptible to radicalization efforts. Finally, COVID-19 has worsened alternative drivers of extremist ideologies, angering many. The culmination of these factors, each caused or exacerbated by the pandemic, will likely drive an increase in violence perpetrated by incels.

### ***The Psychological Toll of COVID-19 and Facilitation of Recruitment and Radicalization***

The psychological impacts of COVID-19 are profound, especially in respect to incels. Heightened levels of stress and depression, in addition to widespread social isolation will facilitate recruitment and radicalization to violent inceldom.

The ability to make informed, rational decisions is altered with the introduction of chronic stressors. The pandemic itself represents one such stimulus and has created many more. For example, financial uncertainty, job insecurity, and social isolation are changing how people around the world make decisions. In addition, chronic stress can negatively impact one's ability to make rational cost-benefit analyses. In a 2017 study, rodents subjected to chronic stress engaged in 'non-optimal decision-making', which increased their likelihood of preferring high-risk, high-reward options.<sup>35</sup> A similar study of 197 undergraduates found that 'higher chronic stress [among them] was related to more deontological moral choices'.<sup>36</sup> The tendency of individuals to avoid moderated choices when under chronic stress is inextricably linked to gravitation towards extremist ideologies.<sup>37</sup> Extended exposure to stressors generated by the pandemic could remove rational and moral considerations by individuals who are targets of radicalization. Given these effects, coronavirus-induced chronic stress will likely facilitate the growth of violent inceldom.

COVID-19 has elevated levels of depression, a common complaint among self-proclaimed incels.<sup>38</sup> Notably, the disorder is directly linked to stress, and exacerbates its symptoms.<sup>39</sup> In a March 2020 survey posed in an incel forum, almost 70% of respondents

---

<sup>35</sup> Alexander Friedman et al., "Chronic Stress Alters Striosome-Circuit Dynamics, Leading to Aberrant Decision-Making," *Cell* 171, no. 5 (16 November 2017): 1191–1205, (accessed 10 April 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cell.2017.10.017>.

<sup>36</sup> Lisong Zhang et al., "Chronic Stress and Moral Decision-Making: An Exploration with the CNI Model," *Frontiers in Psychology* 9:1702, (11 September 2018), (accessed 10 April 2021), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01702>.

<sup>37</sup> Anne Trafton, "Stress Can Lead to Risky Decisions," MIT News (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 16 November 2017), (accessed 10 April 2021), <https://news.mit.edu/2017/stress-can-lead-risky-decisions-1116>.

<sup>38</sup> Hoffman, Ware, and Shapiro, *Assessing the Threat of Incel Violence*, 568.

<sup>39</sup> Harvard Health Publishing, "What Causes Depression?" Harvard Medical School (24 June 2019), (accessed 10 April 2021), <https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/what-causes-depression>.

reportedly suffered from depression.<sup>40</sup> Involvement with these communities perpetuates depression, which leads individuals to engage further with IMVE content.<sup>41</sup> The cyclical nature of this phenomenon reinforces how mental health issues can drive individuals to engage with extremist communities.<sup>42</sup> Academics have characterized these online forums as ‘breeding grounds for defeat’.<sup>43</sup> In an August 2020 survey of over 6,000 adults, respondents cited levels of depression three times higher than a control group prior to the onset of the coronavirus crisis, resultant from many stressors.<sup>44</sup> This dramatic increase in the intensity of depression brought on by the pandemic is concerning, especially as recent evidence links depression with a higher probability of harbouring extremist sympathies.<sup>45</sup> Factoring in the prevalence of the condition within incel circles, these communities may grow as a direct result of the global health crisis. Depression induced by COVID-19 will aggravate the current IMVE threat.

One psychological effect of loneliness and social isolation impacts the perception of social threats. Sensitivity to these is heightened in the top 25% of isolated individuals so that they acquire a hyper-vigilance to social threats.<sup>46</sup> For incels, who resent certain members of society, spending extended amounts of time in solitude may increase their volatility to these perceptions. This hyper-vigilance may increase some fragile individuals’ violent potential, especially towards women.<sup>47</sup>

### ***Increased Internet Usership from COVID-19 Will Likely Enable Incel Violence***

It is probable that spending more time online as a result of COVID-19 restrictions will increase individuals’ potential for radicalization to violent inceldom. From the onset of the pandemic, the time individuals spend on the internet has risen dramatically. Figures from March 2020 show a growth rate of 50-70% since the implementation of lockdowns.<sup>48</sup> Given that a percentage of individuals frequently interact with digital extremist content, this usership increase will inflate the raw number of people engaged in this behaviour.<sup>49</sup> In many Facebook groups associated with right-wing extremist ideologies, membership grew following the initial implementation of lockdowns. In a sample of 125 such online communities, 63% were created between February and April and nearly half of members joined between late March and mid-

<sup>40</sup> Hoffman, Ware, and Shapiro, *Assessing the Threat of Incel Violence*, 568.

<sup>41</sup> Denise Donnelly et al., “Involuntary Celibacy: A Life Course Analysis,” *Journal of Sex Research* 38, no. 2 (11 January 2010): 159–69, (accessed 10 April 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224490109552083>.

<sup>42</sup> Oluf Gøtzsche-Astrup and Lasse Lindekilde, “Either Or? Reconciling Findings on Mental Health and Extremism Using a Dimensional rather than Categorical Paradigm,” *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 64, no. 4 (29 January 2019): 982–88, (accessed 10 April 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1111/1556-4029.14014>.

<sup>43</sup> Maxwell, et al., ‘A Short Story of a Lonely Guy’: *A Qualitative Thematic Analysis of Involuntary Celibacy Using Reddit*, 1865.

<sup>44</sup> <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2020.19686>. Catherine K. Ettman et al., “Prevalence of Depression Symptoms in US Adults before and during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *JAMA Network Open* 3, no. 9 (2 September 2020), (accessed 10 April 2021)

<sup>45</sup> Kamaldeep Bhui et al., “Extremism and Common Mental Illness: Cross-Sectional Community Survey of White British and Pakistani Men and Women Living in England,” *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 217, no. 4 (15 March 2019): 547–54, (accessed 10 April 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.2019.14>.

<sup>46</sup> Munirah Bangee et al., “Loneliness and Attention to Social Threat in Young Adults: Findings from an Eye Tracker Study,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 63, no. (1 June 2014): 16–23, (accessed 10 April 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2014.01.039>.

<sup>47</sup> Maxwell, et al., ‘A Short Story of a Lonely Guy’: *A Qualitative Thematic Analysis of Involuntary Celibacy Using Reddit*, 1866.

<sup>48</sup> Beech, COVID-19 Pushes up Internet Use 70% and Streaming More than 12%, First Figures Reveal.

<sup>49</sup> Nikita Malik, “Self-Isolation Might Stop Coronavirus, but It Will Speed the Spread of Extremism,” *Foreign Policy*, 26 March 2020, (accessed 10 April 2021), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/26/self-isolation-might-stop-coronavirus-but-spread-extremism/>.

April of 2020.<sup>50</sup> This diffusion of online right-wing rhetoric spreads ideas which justify political violence and enables individuals to build social networks. This dramatic growth of far-right extremists' digital footprints begs the question: With their close ideological and social connections, have incels behaved similarly?

It is difficult to quantify incel activity across online platforms. However, research indicates a clear, rapid increase in unique authorship on r/ShortCels, one of the largest Reddit communities for incels in early 2020.<sup>51</sup> This growth correlates closely with the implementation of restrictive public health measures. Due to these precautions, individuals who might lack confidence in pursuing face-to-face relationships would be afforded time to become involved with online incel circles given the opportunity.<sup>52</sup> The dissemination of extremist content further legitimizes and strengthens the ideology, making it progressively more dangerous as internet usership increases.<sup>53</sup>

In a refutation of the premise that internet usership will feed radicalization, critics note that individuals often need social ties to supplement digital interactions.<sup>54</sup> While true in some cases, this is not a universal reality. The virtually exclusive reliance of incel-motivated violent extremists on online spaces to communicate negates this argument and reaffirms the likelihood that the coronavirus pandemic will contribute to the growth of incel communities and violence.

### ***COVID-19 Amplifies Drivers of Violent Extremism***

Many drivers of violent right-wing extremism have been amplified by the coronavirus pandemic. Frustrations with government overreach, economic turmoil, and domestic political volatility will facilitate the initial involvement of individuals who are already active in the far-right ecosystem in incel communities. Many of these grievances will supplement incel ideology and rhetoric to further validate individuals who gravitate towards extremism and seek justification for violence.

In a broader context, right-wing violence has become intersectional. Racial, economic, and political issues have been melded together to assemble a growing ecosystem of far-right groups. An emerging “salad bar” of ideologies presents a virtually unprecedented threat to global security, by which motivations, tactics, and legal definitions are blurred. The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded this intersection of issues, having caused numerous grievances previously discussed. Due to their interactions with “salad bar” ideologies, incel communities will become more accessible to a growing number of individuals as the ecosystem of far-right groups expands.<sup>55</sup>

---

50 Tech Transparency Project, “Extremists Are Using Facebook to Organize for Civil War amid Coronavirus,” 22 April 2020, (accessed 10 April 2021), <https://www.techtransparencyproject.org/articles/extremists-are-using-facebook-to-organize-for-civil-war-amid-coronavirus>.

51 Gothard, Dodds, Danforth, Exploring Incel Language and Subreddit Activity on Reddit, 15.

52 Donnelly et al., Involuntary Celibacy: A Life Course Analysis, 159-69.

53 Ging, Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere, 638–57.

54 Michael King and Sam Mullins, “COVID-19 and Terrorism in the West: Has Radicalization Really Gone Viral?,” Just Security (4 March 2021), (accessed 10 April 2021), <https://www.justsecurity.org/75064/covid-19-and-terrorism-in-the-west-has-radicalization-really-gone-viral/>.

55 Bruce Hoffman and Jacob Ware, “The Terrorist Threat from the Fractured Far Right,” *Lawfare* (blog), 1 November 2020, (accessed 10 April 2021), <https://www.lawfareblog.com/terrorist-threat-fractured-far-right>.

### ***Addressing Current Data Concerning Incel Violence and COVID-19***

A critique of the premise that COVID-19 will provoke incel violence relies on the fact that such an increase has yet to occur. Notably, many perpetrators have attempted to maximize casualties with attacks in Santa Barbara, Parkland, Toronto, and Hesse. Under coronavirus public health restrictions, there exist fewer opportunities to target large public gatherings. However, as these precautions are relaxed, circumstances which make it possible for violent incels to attack large groups will re-emerge.<sup>56</sup>

### ***Policy Recommendations***

Pertinent when discussing remedies to incel violence is the role of schools in recognizing and mitigating threats and working to protect communities. Since 2014, there have been four incidents targeting students perpetrated by incels. In three of these four shootings, social isolation was cited as a significant impetus in the individual's decision to commit the atrocity.<sup>57</sup> In addition to targeting some of the most vulnerable members of the population, school shootings by incels have proven especially lethal, averaging nine deaths per attack.<sup>58</sup>

By providing school districts with resources to identify students with mental health issues who may be susceptible to radicalization, policymakers can neutralize the threat before it arises. As part of this initiative, clear and concise literature would be distributed across school districts to all school personnel. Information describing warning signs for psychological distress and extremist ideologies would be provided, along with steps to refer students to counsellors and psychologists. This program would begin with regional training, wherein representatives from school districts would be equipped with the tools to act as liaisons with departments of education. Tracking referrals and cases, state officials would be able to identify geographic areas of concern and allocate appropriate human, financial, or security resources to address problems. Similar to the proposed initiative, the McCain Institute conducted a study which aimed to identify elementary school students at risk of being radicalized to inceldom.<sup>59</sup> Including administrators, teachers, and parents in the strategy, the program was received positively by all participants and represents a promising model for combating incel ideology before it takes root.<sup>60</sup> This framework could be implemented as virtual classes are phased out and would remain beneficial after the pandemic. Without long-term solutions, children are more vulnerable to not only school shootings, but to the lifelong effects of mental illnesses.

Given that incels communicate largely online, some have advocated for clinicians to employ cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) in these virtual settings.<sup>61</sup> Mental illness is prevalent among incels, and accessible healthcare is a possible remedy.<sup>62</sup> An initiative to make CBT treatment available from trained experts, even over the internet, could have a positive

---

<sup>56</sup> Mia Bloom, *How Extremists Are Exploiting COVID-19*.

<sup>57</sup> Hoffman, Ware, and Shapiro, *Assessing the Threat of Incel Violence*, 571.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> The McCain Institute, "Confronting Incel Isolation before It Starts," 20 July 2020, (accessed 10 April 2021), <https://www.mccainstitute.org/news/confronting-incel-isolation-before-it-starts/>.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Maxwell, et al., 'A Short Story of a Lonely Guy': A Qualitative Thematic Analysis of Involuntary Celibacy Using Reddit, 1871.

<sup>62</sup> Zoe Hastings, David Jones, and Laura Stolte, "Involuntary Celibates: Background for Practitioners" (Edmonton, Alberta: Organization for the Prevention of Violence, May 2020), (accessed 10 April 2021), [https://preventviolence.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Involuntary-Celibates-Background-for-Practitioners\\_webupdate.pdf](https://preventviolence.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Involuntary-Celibates-Background-for-Practitioners_webupdate.pdf).

impact on patients.<sup>63</sup> The federal government should take initiative and approach extremism from a public health perspective, first by assembling a team of experts to study the magnitude of radicalization across incel forums. Contracting mental health professionals to provide this treatment would bolster the program and accelerate its implementation. Providing CBT within online incel communities could provide mental health resources to individuals whose psychological wellbeing is deeply compromised, and a successful program would diminish the threat of incel violence.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, this framework might serve as a sustainable model to combat jihadist and other extremist threats in an increasingly digital world.

Trans-Atlantic communication between far-right groups has grown in recent years, and governments around the world must react to the shift.<sup>65</sup> The diffusion of ideologies, conspiracy theories, and other information online has enabled the deliverance of extremist ideologies to Europe. Throughout the pandemic, many governments have enforced stringent lockdown measures, creating additional opportunities for incels to interact with extremist content and perpetuate this trans-Atlantic dialogue. Given that social isolation can make individuals more susceptible to extremism, the number of perpetrators, especially outside of North America may increase as a result of the pandemic. States, especially those which have enforced stringent quarantine measures, must recognize social isolation as a potential catalyst for violence. No single policy initiative can serve as a remedy to every problem. Thus, governments must collaborate with academics and public health experts to tailor mental health and counterterrorism initiatives to best suit the threat. Responsibly implementing programs based on the options outlined previously would mitigate the risk of incel-motivated violence.

### ***Conclusion***

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the global threat posed by violent extremism. The crisis has made fragile individuals more susceptible to radicalization, increased interaction with extremist content, and erased divisions between violent actors around the world. Indeed, the pandemic has radically impacted nearly every facet of terrorist operations. As a result, the global community is now more vulnerable to IMVE than at any time in the recent past.

The pandemic has arguably impacted incels more severely than any other violent extremist community. The coronavirus altered incels' self-conceptions and aligned them more closely with right-wing organizations. Social isolation from lockdowns has worsened existing mental illnesses and increased susceptibility to extremist rhetoric. Finally, digital communities have grown and become further radicalized as a result of heightened internet usage.

Incel-motivated violence poses a greater threat to global security now because of the coronavirus. The pandemic has taken a severe psychological toll on many, causing elevated rates of chronic stress and depression. This dramatic change will make many incels less resistant to radicalization efforts, and some may become extremely volatile. Elevated internet

---

<sup>63</sup> Derek Richards, Ladislav Timulak, and David Hevey, "A Comparison of Two Online Cognitive-Behavioural Interventions for Symptoms of Depression in a Student Population: The Role of Therapist Responsiveness," *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research* 13, no. 3 (September 2013): 184–93, (accessed 10 April 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733145.2012.733715>.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Institute for Strategic Dialogue, "Trans-Atlantic Journeys of Far-Right Narratives through Online-Media Ecosystems," *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, 1 December 2020, (accessed 10 April 2021), <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/trans-atlantic-journeys-of-far-right-narratives-through-online-media-ecosystems/>.

usership will inflate the sheer number of users interacting with extremist content online and create additional opportunities for radicalization. As incels become more integrated into the far-right ecosystem, their ideology will pose a greater risk to the public.

IMVE actors are more advanced than ever before, and innovative strategies must be implemented to counter the threat. As what were once universal norms become blurred, dynamic programs must be set in motion to ensure our global security. This includes employing unconventional approaches to address radicalization. Initiatives to neutralize extremist ideas before they take root and provide mental health resources to radicalized individuals must be implemented to the fullest extent possible. Funding additional research into preventative and deradicalization programs is crucial as it will guide our next steps against extremist actors.

The COVID-19 pandemic marks a new chapter in the fight against global terrorism. Recognizing and responding to immediate threats is of paramount importance, but lasting solutions will require us to re-evaluate how we counter violent extremism both at home and abroad. We must pursue frameworks and mechanisms to not only address the risks resultant from the coronavirus, but to be prepared for the next global crisis when it occurs.