



Women and Equalities Committee

Oral evidence: Incel culture, HC 665

Wednesday 15 May 2024

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 15 May 2024.

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Members present: Kate Osborne (in the Chair); Dame Jackie Doyle-Price; Kirsten Oswald; Bell Ribeiro-Addy.

In the absence of the Chair, Kate Osborne was called to the Chair.

Questions 1 - 42

Witnesses

I: Dr Andrew G Thomas, Senior Lecturer in Psychology, Swansea University; Dr Joe Whittaker, Senior Lecturer in Criminology, Sociology and Social Policy, Swansea University; William Costello, PhD student of Individual Differences and Evolutionary Psychology, University of Texas, Austin.



Examination of witnesses

Dr Andrew G Thomas, Dr Joe Whittaker and William Costello.

Q1 Chair: Welcome to this one-off session of the Women and Equalities Committee on incel culture and ideology. Thank you very much for coming along. Can I ask you all to introduce yourselves, and please let us know if you are happy to be addressed by your first name? If I can start with you, Andrew?

Dr Thomas: I am a senior lecturer of psychology at Swansea University and yes, feel free to call me Andrew.

Dr Whittaker: I am a senior lecturer in criminology, sociology and social policy at Swansea University, and I would much rather Joe as well, please.

William Costello: I am a doctoral researcher from the University of Texas at Austin and I am happy for you to call me William.

Q2 Chair: Thank you all very much. This question is addressed to you all, but Andrew, can I ask you to answer first? Can you tell us what we mean by incel and is there an agreed and useful working definition of this term?

Dr Thomas: There is agreement on the term, which stands for involuntarily celibate, but there are two things going on. First, you have it as a definition of relationship, or absence of relationship, status. In that sense, it means someone who is not having sex and they feel that is not something under their control: it is involuntary.

Separate to that, you have the incel community, so a group of men who have built an identity around that label, which is something quite different. It is not uncommon to have individuals who will identify with the label describing their relationship status but who are not part of any community, and do not go on forums or anything like that. It is very much tied to that sexlessness.

Dr Whittaker: I have very little to add to that apart from understanding what incels are particularly well known for, which is some extraordinarily toxic posting online. That is why, to be quite frank, it is very newsworthy and why we talk about it. You only need to log on to one of these forums for about five minutes to see extreme hostile misogyny and it being very commonplace.

William Costello: Yes, and some of that aggressive misogyny, in still rarer instances, can turn into violent rage. We have some high-profile examples of incel killings, which are a cause of great concern.

Q3 Chair: Thank you. If I stay with you for a minute William, has the definition changed at all over time?

William Costello: Yes. The original incel community was actually set up by a lesbian woman in the late 1990s, and it was a pretty benign support



group for people who were involuntarily single. The community has descended into toxicity since then and no longer resembles that original inception. It is now the misogynistic online subculture that we know.

Q4 **Chair:** Andrew, I will come back to you; is it an exclusively male culture?

Dr Thomas: It depends on who you ask. If you ask incels themselves, then they will say yes. Their argument will be that women, compared with men, find it much easier to gain sexual access. The voices of incels would say that if a woman is sexless then that is through their choice or maybe through their pickiness, whereas they see their plight, if you will, as even though they would like to have sex and relationships, they are not being chosen for that. The hopelessness that comes with the incel community is that they feel there is very little they can do to change that.

That is from the voices within the incel community, but separately you have smaller communities of women who would describe themselves as femcel. A greater, growing change is this concept of insings, so involuntarily single, and that seems to apply more to women in the sense that they feel competent to gain access to sex, but they find it very difficult to set up meaningful romantic relationships and find long-term commitment from others.

Q5 **Chair:** Do you know how many people identify as incel in the UK?

Dr Thomas: It is very hard to pin down that number so we cannot answer that precisely. What we do know is that we have online communities and forums, and you can see the membership of those. We also have subreddits, and those tend to have numbers in the tens of thousands. But for every person you have on those forums, there will be other individuals who are not joining a forum. They may be digesting the content quite separately and not signing up to an account. If you are talking about young men who feel excluded from relationships, then that number could easily be in seven figures worldwide.

William Costello: To add to that, we conducted some cross-cultural research on singlehood more broadly, which I think had roughly 7,000 participants from 14 different countries, and 13% of people in that dataset identified as involuntarily single. In terms of the incel subculture, right now I think there are roughly 20,000 active users in the main online forum, incels.is. It oscillates between 20,000 to maybe 100,000 at any given time. That is our best estimate.

Dr Thomas: That is just one forum. As we cover in the report, there are lots of different ways incels network. Pseudo-anonymous and anonymous forums are one way, but there are other methods that do not lend themselves to recording numbers.

Dr Whittaker: To add to that complexity of trying to pin down an exact number, our research demonstrates that, like almost every other human being, incels are using multiple platforms at the same time. It is in the



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tens of thousands, but they could be on multiple forums, multiple subreddits, and so on.

William Costello: One final point, it is important to acknowledge that other research has found that the vast majority of incel content in the forums is produced by roughly 10% of the accounts. That is not to say there is not tacit agreement from the people who do not post in the forums, but like with any community, the most extreme content is produced by a fringe minority.

Dr Thomas: That is one of the reasons we have tried to go for primary research data and actually reach out to incels to study them. A lot of the research in the area tends to be secondary data analysis, so scraping information from forums, and, as Will said, if we have a small proportion of people who are generating the content, then that research is going to be giving a potentially biased view of what incels as a population believe.

Q6 **Chair:** Thank you. Joe, I will ask you this one: what does incel ideology have in common with the ideology of other groups occupying the manosphere, for example pick-up artists or self-proclaimed misogynists? I am not going to name one.

Dr Whittaker: Thank you, I appreciate it. Although it is parliamentary privilege, I guess. The manosphere is an interesting way of thinking about this, because what you have is a lot of groups that clearly have some kind of misogynistic attitude, sometimes verging on the violent. It includes people who come to it from a range of political viewpoints but what you can see clearly within the manosphere is sections of the far right, and clear agreement with what anyone would describe as far-right ideology, occupying the same space as incels.

Perhaps the easiest way of differentiating the two is the way that incels themselves, and in fact these members of the far right, like to do it, which is by thinking about the red pill and the black pill. The red pill comes from the film "The Matrix". Was it 1997?

William Costello: 1999.

Dr Whittaker: 1999, sorry, in which the idea is that if you take the red pill, your eyes are opened and you understand the truth of the world. A cornerstone of the ideology of both is that there is something of a mating crisis that has been caused by the growth of feminism in the second half of the last century, leading to a lot of sexual freedom for women and this mating crisis for men. That is a general point of agreement for both the red pill and the black pill. Where incels differ and the black pill starts to begin, is this sense of hopelessness, that there is no real opportunity to change; if you are an incel, you are at the lowest rung of the sexual or dating marketplace, as it were, and you should basically give up and go from there.



Dr Thomas: Yes. One of the ways I like to describe this is that red pill tends to have an element of agency and okay, realising how the world is, you now need to try to change—change yourself, change your behaviour—whereas the black pill is more about giving up. They have a trope, which is, “Hope, cope, or rope.” So the pathway is you stay hopeful that something might change, you find a way to cope with your tragedy, or you take the ultimate way out. It is a very bleak, hopeless perspective from the incel community that you do not find in the wider manosphere.

William Costello: Yes, and just to add to that, in terms of attempts to radicalise each other or radicalise others, that is how that would manifest; they encourage others to swallow the black pill and accept that particularly bleak truth as they see it. That is the way radicalisation attempts happen within the incel community.

Q7 **Chair:** How much crossover is there between the two? Is there a half red, half black?

William Costello: You would see a direction of travel where people might initially embrace the red pill and then descend into the black pill. There is some data to show there is a direct pipeline of users of pick-up artist forums to incel forums. The way to maybe think about that working is, if you are a young man who is struggling to learn about the dating market, you might turn to pick-up artists, and you might attempt some of the crude tactics that they describe, and you might find that they do not work. Then, if they do not work, you may reach the conclusion of, “Ah, I’ve tried the blueprint manual, it didn’t work, I must be incel.”

This is particularly pointed when you think about the high levels of autism spectrum disorder among incels. They are very black and white in their thinking, and the black pill analysis of the dating market fits very much with black and white rigid thinking. It is very static. We see very poor mental health in incels more broadly, and when an individual is in poor mental health, they switch from analysing the complexity of the world to a very black and white, easier to explain analysis of complex issues.

Dr Whittaker: To supplement that, there has been research looking at that broader manosphere over time with a linguistic analysis of sentiment and toxicity. It found that in that movement towards incel culture and in the world of pick-up artists and so on, it has generally become more toxic and negative than it was 10, 15 years ago.

William Costello: Also, some research compared the extreme language of those different groups—pick-up artists, incels, men going their own way and so on—in terms of the misogynistic content and I believe incels were, counter-intuitively, second last, which is surprising.

Dr Thomas: I was just going to say there is a dearth of primary research on the incel community full stop and the next step is to do something longitudinal, so we can actually see how the path to inceldom works. We



believe that it starts in this very red pill place and becomes more black pill and, over time, more focused inwards and then outwards towards others. That is what the cross-sectional data seems to show us but we are lacking that good causal evidence, which is what our research programme is trying to do next.

William Costello: Future research should maybe focus on incel exit forums, which are forums that consist of individuals who no longer see themselves as incel and have exited that worldview. It could be very informative to do some primary research with individuals who identify as former incels to see what worked to de-radicalise them, what helped, and maybe to find some credible peer role models that we could champion for current incels.

Q8 **Chair:** Can I ask you, is incel culture always violent? Are there some parts of the culture that do not glorify violence or extreme misogyny?

Dr Thomas: There are many things to say about this. I have a perspective as someone who works quite closely with incels in a clinical setting. I see a lot of clients in my clinical work. Many people within the incel community are quite far away from that violent edge. They have the misogynistic views, and they perpetuate those views, so they are still harmful to women. However, if we are talking about that turning into physical acts of violence, such as we sometimes see, a lot of these individuals are people who are very socially reserved, have very poor social skills, and very poor social networks around them. They predominantly direct that hatred inwards at themselves. It is a far smaller proportion, it seems, who direct it predominantly outwards at others.

This is somewhat echoed in the report we produced. We were restricted in what questions we could ask in terms of violence but the question we did ask was, "If someone was committing an act of violence against a member of the incel community, to what extent is it okay to use violence to defend them?" We gave the options of often, some of the time and never. We found about 5% of people came back and said often and about 25% either said sometimes or often. So straight away we have three-quarters who are not near that edge in terms of their perspective on the application of violence. There is a much smaller subsection who say often and actually when we break it down and look at the characteristics of those who are saying often we find a familiar package of traits around them in terms of dark personality traits and right-wing political leanings.

Dr Whittaker: There are two important things to say. First is that there should be a huge disclaimer about any survey data that talks about proclivity to violence. For both practical and ethical reasons, it is basically not possible to ask someone if they intend to commit violence. No university ethics board would ever sanction something like that.

Q9 **Chair:** So in that case, do you think there is a moral panic around this?



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Dr Whittaker: Would you mind if I finish my train of thought because I think that will be quite instructive?

Chair: Yes, carry on.

Dr Whittaker: So, we cannot ask that. The best we can use is a proxy variable like talking about the justification of violence, but in different ways that will both over and underestimate the position. For example, what us social scientists would call social desirability bias. People like to answer questions in accordance with social norms.

On the other side, you have something called the behaviour intention gap, which crudely summarised means talk is cheap; it is very easy to answer something in a survey, whether you are actually going to do it is another thing. So it is really, really difficult to get into and understand what that true proclivity to violence is. Whenever I talk about this, I try to say this is not a good proxy for radicalisation or anything like that because we do not actually know how it would pertain in the real world.

The other thing I would say is, when we think about incels, there is a temptation to think about it from a terrorist perspective; I am a researcher of terrorism. However, depending on how you count, there have been fewer than half a dozen—maybe a little more if you use a slightly different metric of counting—of those big, mass casualty incel attacks, which is really, really low. In that sense, one might come away concluding that there is something of a moral panic there.

On the other hand, it is really important to say that that is not the only type of harm that comes from this. There can be an emphasis on thinking about the big casualty attacks and things like that, but we can see clearly from that community that there are what we might describe as online harms: harassment, doxxing of people, posting of misogynistic things. They are not as headline-grabbing as big terrorist attacks, but they are still harms that exist. So in some ways there is a bit of a moral panic, but in other ways there is a justifiable concern.

William Costello: Yes. I would add that from the terrorism studies perspective, there does not seem to be a largely agreed upon end goal and collective action that incels as a group should mobilise towards. In that sense, they are a little different from other extremist and terrorist groups. By the same token, the individual profile of a sexless young man who is very disgruntled with society, who feels purposelessness in his life, is the prime target for radicalisation for all sorts of radical groups. So the threat, we would say, is from the individual lone actor who gives up on society, gives up on his own life and is a threat to himself and others who may be harmed in his own suicide. The high-profile attacks have fit that profile.

Q10 **Chair:** In that instance, is there a genuine risk to women's safety?



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William Costello: Women and broader society in those attacks, so it is in everyone's interest to help this generation of young men to re-engage with society because, as my colleague Joe said, it is an opportunity cost of a significant minority of young men engaging with these attitudes. They live their lives alongside women and alongside everyone, so it is important to re-engage them with society.

Dr Whittaker: Yes, there is a real temptation to focus very heavily on incels but again, with my terrorism researcher hat on, misogyny, in particular violent misogyny, is something that undercuts pretty much every extremist and terrorist movement that exists out there. A very strong hyperfocus on one aspect of the issue could cause people to overlook that, in reality, misogyny undercuts pretty much every type of extremism.

Dr Thomas: I suppose to summarise and answer your question, it depends on what one is panicking about. If the panic is about the harm that is caused by perpetuating misogynistic beliefs, then I feel that is somewhat justified. If you were to take an incel from the bag of total incels and ask what danger that person is going to pose, most likely it is first and foremost a threat to the self. That is what the statistics show us in terms of self-harm, and then to the other in terms of perpetuating that misogynistic worldview.

It is becoming a bit of a pattern now in the incels that I see in private practice that they will say things like, "If I was to see a woman come to harm in the street, if they were to be attacked, I would turn away. I would become passive and not intervene." It is a very different relationship to the harm of women rather than saying, "I want to actively go and harm."

Q11 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you to all on the panel. In trying to identify who an incel might be, would you be able to describe what demographic they might be in in terms of ethnicity, age, education, or class? I will ask that to you all.

Dr Thomas: First and foremost, we can start by telling you what the stereotype is. One angle of our research is to challenge stereotypes. Historically, incels were thought to have been young, right-wing and NEET, not in education, employment or training, and white. It is not uncommon, especially if you watch the American media, to see that stereotype being perpetuated. With our primary research, we were able to actually go to these individuals, both in the US and the UK, look for differences and ask to what extent it was true. Will, are you best placed to pick that up?

William Costello: Counter-intuitively, we found there is actually a disproportionate number of people of colour among the incel community in our data and in others as well. In our latest data, which is an exclusively US and UK sample, 42% of participants identified as a person of colour, which is an over-representation.



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In terms of the other demographic profiles, they are very disengaged from employment and training. We found extraordinarily high rates of autism among incels. Previous research found that 18% of incels self-reported as having an autism diagnosis. In our latest study, we used a measure called the AQ10, which is a clinical measure to diagnose autism. By this measure, 80% of people who score six out of 10 or above go on to get an autism diagnosis. Using this measure, 30% of our incel sample would meet those diagnostic criteria, which is extraordinarily high considering the baseline rate for men in the population with autism is 1%.

I want to be very clear: I am not saying that men with autism are uniquely violent or at risk of violence. There is data to suggest that they are no more violent than the general population, but we see that young men with autism may be particularly vulnerable to the incel ideology and, when captured by that ideology, may have a propensity for violence due to the rigid black and white thinking that we see.

Dr Whittaker: If you take away extreme attitudes, autistic people often talk about the online space as an area which is sometimes a bit easier for them to navigate, to pick their own rules of socialisation and interaction and things like that. So when we are talking about very online communities like incels, and there are several types of online community, you might expect an over-representation of people with autism as well.

William Costello: It is a forum where they may feel accepted for the first time, after feeling perhaps bullied by wider society. In the incel community, there is a reward for hyper-focus on a niche topic of knowledge which young men with autism might appreciate. That is one reason why young men with autism might be drawn to the community, and it gives them a clear black and white blueprint as to why they are struggling in romantic relationships: an explanation for their struggles.

Dr Whittaker: To extrapolate on that, and thinking about violent extremism more broadly, the dynamic you will often see is what you might call an in-group. So you have the people you identify with, and then you have an out-group, which is largely causing whatever struggles your current in-group is facing. The usual solution for the extreme group, or movement, is violence against the out-group because they are causing this level of suffering, or hatred, or something along those lines. Again, you might see that kind of black and white thinking more often in people who have autism.

Will touched on this a second ago, but I want to make it clear that it is not an excuse in any way. We do not mean to handwave away, nor do we mean to stigmatise people with autism, but we have to be truthful to the findings of our research.

Dr Thomas: To come back to the demographics; in addition to the high rates of autism, we have found that there is a mixed bag of ages although, on average, they are to the younger side, but more around 25



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than 18 or 19. A large proportion are non-white. Only 18%, so less than one in five, would carry that NEET label of not having a job and not being in education. We have even found evidence that they have a big mixed bag of political opinions which, if you dumb it down by taking an average, is actually slightly left leaning.

So a lot of the research we are doing is challenging some stereotypes and giving us a clearer picture of who these young men are, and there is a lot of variety.

William Costello: In our original data on political views, we found that incels, on average, identified as slightly left of centre. In our latest data, we used the Pew Ideological Consistency Scale to measure actual political beliefs and again, on average, they scored slightly left of centre. Importantly, those who are more right-wing are more likely to endorse violence. This fits with the broader extremism literature that right-wing radicals are more likely to be violent than left-wing radicals.

Q12 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Thinking of the original stereotype, and how research is not now correlating with it, is there any particular reason the stereotype became the stereotype and people were not observing different groups behaving in the same way? Was it that there was a lack of research into it, or was it that that particular stereotype was the one committing the high-profile crimes?

Dr Whittaker: If you think about the really high-profile attacks, these are typically younger white men. There is again a high prevalence of autism within these young white men. After 2018, when there were two high-profile attacks, we suddenly started to get a lot of news stories and documentaries that all sold the idea of, in western countries, a white person sitting in their bedroom, unable to have any dating success and being slowly radicalised. It is not that there is no truth to it but, particularly when it comes to things like race and ethnicity, we do see quite a lot of diversity as well.

William Costello: Yes. There could be a tendency to lump a lot of problematic young male groups into one, and one problematic group of young men is far right. We see this with the tendency to lump incels into the broader manosphere as well as generally being one thing whereas, actually, there are distinct differences between them in kind.

Q13 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** I know researchers found a correlation between NEETs and those identifying as incels. Would you be able to explain what the research is saying about that, and why you think that might be?

Dr Thomas: Yes. The issue is with the term NEET. The assumption that comes with NEET is that one has no money and no status, but the job that you are in and the education you have may also not be considered very prestigious or lead to well-paying jobs. In our sample, although we had quite a few participants who were in full-time education, students did not necessarily consider themselves to be very pound-rich and flush. If



the real root here is feeling that one does not have any element of status or prestige, then NEET does not necessarily capture all the people who have those feelings about themselves.

William Costello: From the broader literature we know that two of the biggest predictors of male suicidal ideation is failure in heterosexual mating and feeling like you are a burden to your kin. Both of these factors are very salient for incels, who obviously struggle in their sexual and romantic goals, are likely to live with their parents into adulthood and be NEET, so would constitute both risk factors for suicidal ideation.

Q14 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Is the profile demographic in the US consistent across other comparable countries, perhaps in Europe?

William Costello: In our latest data, we had samples from the US and the UK, and we found very few cross-cultural differences between them. My intuition is that the incel subculture almost constitutes a culture in and of itself. Given that it is so online, people who gravitate towards it are engaging in a type of culture in and of itself that I do not think is likely to vary much from country to country.

There is interesting data from other researchers which found that you can actually predict geographic areas of high online incel activity using three variables that are linked to what we describe as the local mating ecology. The three predicting variables are: high income inequality overall, low gender pay gaps which might indicate that women do not feel as much social pressure to settle with men out of economic necessity, and, finally, male-biased sex ratios where there are fewer single women in the ecology anyway on a sheer numbers basis. So, it is interesting that you can predict areas where incels are likely to arise.

Q15 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Those are very specific: are there any countries that ideally fit that profile?

William Costello: The country used to make those predictions was the US, but you could look at countries of high-income inequality as risk factor areas.

Dr Thomas: That was the point I was going to make. The study was within the US. You can look at where the variation is, state by state. The fact that you get quite a bit of variation within the US indicates there is no reason why you would not see it outside.

Anecdotally, we have met incels from a lot of different countries in Europe where it has taken on a different flavour. Countries like Japan, where there seems to be some element of young men socially withdrawing from society, have incels but who are not the same forum users or share the same ideology. It is almost as though you have a phenomenon that happens to young men who feel like they are excluded from relationships, and then you have the ideology that comes with it separately, and that ideology is more prevalent within Europe than Asia, for example.



William Costello: The Japanese phenomenon is called the Hikikomori. You could look to Japan almost as a canary in the coal mine in terms of the direction of travel for young men who might increasingly retreat from society. Given that incel rhetoric is so hypersexual and vulgarly sexual in its nature, there is a tendency to fixate on the sexual issue. However, you could conceptualise incels as a wider retreat from society more generally: they lack friendships and are disengaged more broadly.

Q16 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Thank you very much. Andrew, could you explain a bit more about the role of thinking errors in incel culture?

Dr Thomas: Yes. In CBT practice we would call thinking errors cognitive distortions. They are ways of thinking thoughts that we have that are distorted. Examples of thinking errors we might see in the therapy space would be black and white thinking. So seeing situations or people as all or nothing, with nothing in-between, or catastrophising, for example, so always thinking that the worst possible outcome is going to happen.

Psychotherapists are used to dealing with these types of thinking errors because they come hand-in-hand with things like depression and anxiety. A lot of times, with something like CBT, it is really the thinking errors that you are addressing that then helps with the emotions and mental health afterwards.

If you look at incel rhetoric online, it is riddled with cognitive distortions or thinking errors. There is a lot of black and white thinking. There is a lot of labelling. There is a lot of catastrophising: so things are bad for me now and they are never going to get any better. These tend to be general thinking errors, and our research has shown some specific ones. Will and I wrote a paper where we showed that incels overestimate and underestimate different mate preferences that women have. They do so with enough consistency that you can see the differences as a group compared to other men, you can see that coming through. So believing that women put more of an emphasis on physical attractiveness in a mate than kindness. This might be an example of a very specific thinking error about a very certain thing but, in general, we see these things which would not be unfamiliar to someone working within the therapy space and is intimately connected with poor mental health.

William Costello: It might be informative to think that incels score very highly on a personality trait of victimhood, which is comprised of four different measures. One is a significant need for recognition: this preoccupation with having the legitimacy of their grievance acknowledged. It actually is more aggravating for people to say to incels, "Oh, you could actually get a girlfriend if you tried a little harder" or, "It is not all hopeless for you." They actually prefer information that verifies their negative self-view. The second dimension of the trait of victimhood is moral elitism: the belief that an individual or their in-group behaves more morally than others. You might see this in incels in that they consider female mate preferences as quite superficial, and they sneer at it, whereas they might consider themselves as having loftier preferences.



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Third is a lack of empathy, which manifests in incels in the way of, “Nobody cares about my pain, why should I care about anyone else’s?” That is a big theme in incel rhetoric. Finally, the dimension of rumination: the preoccupation with reflecting on perceived instances of being slighted. It fits with the self-verification; they are seeking information from the world that verifies their worldview that society hates them. This explains why incels engage in what I describe as performative antagonism, so they say whatever they can to annoy people and engineer criticism which they then use to fuel their worldview that society has given up on them.

What might be informative, in terms of therapeutic interventions, is that proving them wrong is very important: giving them evidence that we do not want to exclude them from society.

Dr Thomas: One of the key things that sustains thinking errors and cognitive distortions is having confirmation bias, so the incel community is very good at generating content that feeds into and confirms their beliefs. That perpetuates, worsens, and sustains the thinking errors that they have.

Q17 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Is there anything we can do to challenge these thinking errors, either therapeutically or from earlier education?

Dr Thomas: This is one of the reasons why we take multiple angles in our research. Our research is saying that there are opportunities to intervene from an ideological, networking, and mental health perspective.

From a mental health perspective, sometimes people misunderstand mental health support. They think you are sitting opposite someone who just says, “There, there” and agrees with whatever you say. Proper mental health support is actually about having a strong therapeutic relationship that leads to the challenging of one’s beliefs. Actually, if you wanted to get a gold standard intervention that is going to lead to someone changing harmful and faulty beliefs, it would be the types of interventions we use in mental health work, CBT being a prime example.

There are whole families of interventions that come under that mental health label. There are also behavioural supports with regard to social skill development, and we may come on to this a little later. There is this perspective over what you do with an incel now who is at risk of causing harm, and what do we do to intervene much further upstream with men who are not incel before they get to that point? They definitely lend themselves to different types of intervention.

Dr Whittaker: When we think about counter-extremism interventions, there is really not a lot of evidence that they are doing anything productive. That is really important to state.

It has been about 20 years since the start of the war on terror, of people trying to think about what are sometimes called soft interventions—non-



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military and non-police interventions—trying to win hearts and minds, trying to dissuade people out of extremist ideology. It would be fair to say that, with a few exceptions, there is very little evidence that anything has been productive. In some instances, there is evidence that a challenge to someone's ideology may cause them to dig deeper into their existing ideology.

You get this problem where you can look at adjacent fields like clinical practice, which has a long history of success in helping people, but, when thinking about extremism, it is so large that it becomes very difficult to scale in terms of something as expensive as one-on-one therapy. However, there is no real evidence that this idea of a counter-narrative, a fact-check, or a challenge works. You end up between a rock and a hard place. You cannot scale the things that you have some confidence in, and you do not really know if the things that you can afford to do actually work.

William Costello: Another challenge is getting incels to have any buy-in towards re-engaging with mental health interventions. They invariably tell us, in our qualitative interviews, that they have tried to get mental health support and have had very negative experiences with it. So it will be necessary to reverse engineer the process and actually work with clinicians to design a bespoke style of therapy that they may re-engage with, because the No. 1 predictor of any therapeutic alliance relationship or therapeutic intervention working is the strength of that relationship and the therapist being seen as a credible actor who really understands their issue. So working with clinicians to help them understand the incel mindset might be informative. Again, the need is for longitudinal data to track the long-term trajectories of incels and to research the incel exit, individuals who have actually exited, to see what worked for them. However, it requires further research to see what interventions have efficacy.

Dr Thomas: Some qualitative work has been specifically focusing on the path into incelism and how they have engaged with mental health services. We have had individuals who have seen 12 therapists and each time it has broken down. It is almost a list, do not do this if you want to keep an incel engaged in the process. We are working on it; a strong therapeutic alliance is very important.

The other thing to bear in mind is, when it comes to therapy, sometimes clients want to work with certain types of people. You see this in substance misuse and alcoholism. A lot of the time, some alcoholics will only work with people who have been through the journey themselves. So there is possibly a discussion to be had about being sensitive to that issue as well, particularly because, as we show in the report, incels see their enemy as feminists. Actually, there is a growing trend, particularly in the US, for therapists to show their hand in terms of their philosophical position. We have had several incels who have said, "It turned out that my therapist was a feminist. I don't agree with that: they can't possibly



understand my position, so I'm out of here." In reality, that was a competent mental health professional who probably could have done a lot of good work. So there is something there about how therapy is administered, and by whom, once it is set up and established.

William Costello: Interestingly, to add from the qualitative interviews that we have done, I often ask in each interview the question, "How would you know you are no longer an incel? What would have to change? Get one girlfriend? Have sex one time?" Invariably, they describe it like alcoholism, that they could have a relapse. So it really is this way of thinking, this worldview, rather than even a particular predicament.

Q18 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** In terms of challenging the thinking errors, at what point has research found that those who go into inceldom start to adopt these views? Other than mainly the online space, is there anything else that predicts this? Is there a way to identify when the best intervention might be because it sounds like what is happening afterwards is not working as well?

Dr Thomas: Unless my colleagues correct me, we do not know because there is no decent longitudinal research. What I can tell you is that we are starting to build a bit of a picture from some cross-sectoral research. Speckhard et al. did a very interesting study recently where they showed that you can find clusters of incels within the community. Most fall into a category where they still have a little of hope that things might change for them, and they do not have as extreme misogynistic views. You then have a smaller group of people they call internalisers: they are really giving themselves a hard time, at high risk of self-harm, but also have really strong misogynistic views. Then you have a smaller group still, who they call externalisers, where it has really festered and is now being directed outwards. When you put these side by side, they almost feel like a funnel, a direction that people are going in. They are arriving in the community still with a bit of hope then, over time, turning it inwards and, finally, turning it outwards.

We do not know this for certain, but it would make sense in light of what we see. This leads us to believe that individuals are not arriving in these communities as completely blank slates with no concept of the ideology. There is enough ideology out there on social media and anonymous forums that anyone can just nip into. You can see this stuff on Facebook, for example, that just comes up on your feed. So, by the time someone gets to the point where they have joined a community, they are already very much aware of incel ideology and maybe buy into it a little. Which might explain why, in the research, we found a slightly weaker influence of networking, the degree to which people are really getting stuck into communities: they may already be at the point where they have bought into the ideology so further networking with people is not really having more of an effect on them.

William Costello: What might be informative is encouraging incels to cultivate actual social relationships offline. If they are learning about



dating dynamics from very toxic online platforms only, and lack real-world social relationships to challenge that learning, they are going to go with that. That could potentially be an intervention: cultivate role models that crack the certainty of their black pill belief and, once a little crack in that certainty is present, it could be hopeful.

Q19 Kirsten Oswald: That brings me nicely onto the question I would like to ask you about: networking. The research that has been done has found that poor mental health and adoption of incel ideology was significantly more likely to predict the development of harmful views than social networking. So, developing on what you have already said, what more can you tell us about that?

Dr Thomas: The first caveat is that we are not saying that networking does not have an influence. All the variables that we have found in our analysis have their own impact on incel propensity for harm. What we are finding is that impact is stronger for poor mental health. I always give a layman's summary of, "If I do not care about myself, then I am less likely to care about other people." That is how we see it as a contributor to harm, and then the ideology itself.

The really interesting thing, and why networking in our discussion is maybe not dwelt upon as much as we could, is that we have also found a really interesting bidirectional relationship between mental health and ideology. They wind each other up. The more I am agreeing with the ideology, the worse my mental health gets. The worse my mental health gets, the more susceptible I am to the ideology. That is really important. It is notoriously hard to change ideological beliefs, particularly if your intention is to tell someone to stop having them. People tend to hold on to their beliefs quite dearly, whereas mental health support generally is very good, over a prolonged period, at building a relationship with someone until you trust them, you listen to them, and you are willing to have your beliefs challenged and changed that way. The fact that that bidirectional relationship sprung out, and the fact that that may give us a way of thinking about intervention that has not been considered before, is maybe why, in the report, networking is not discussed at length. But there is a lot to say about it.

Dr Whittaker: It tells us something quite interesting about our responses to it as well. Clearly, when we think about extremism, misogyny, hate speech, and things like that, the movement over the last 10 years or so has been to try to remove as much of it from the internet as possible. Now we can make the case that it simply existing online is problematic and harmful. There is a really good argument for that, but no one should be under the illusion that, if you break up the networking, it is going to stop. It is not. Again, our research shows there are several different ways in; there are other really important factors that take place.

So, despite the fact that I said we needed to understand that the history of counter-extremism interventions is not very good, unfortunately just removing it from the internet is not going to stop it at all. There is no



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reason to believe that that is the case. It will have to be a multi-pronged approach.

William Costello: In fact, incels might perceive such attempts of shutting down their forums as further evidence that society does not want them to even talk and to feel further excluded from society.

Q20 **Kirsten Oswald:** In incel forums, a premium is put on saying outrageous things because these posts get the most attention, they provoke the most discussion. To what extent do you think that pushes an individual into genuinely adopting extremist views? I do not know who wants to go first.

William Costello: There is new research to show that social media companies in general reward more extreme content that is outrageous and engineers outrage in the viewers. That is problematic, perhaps. In terms of whether that content being amplified leads to greater adoption of those beliefs, I do not know of any research on that, but it intuitively seems like it could be the case.

Q21 **Kirsten Oswald:** Before we go on, can I just ask you to clarify that point about social media companies rewarding the most extreme content? I tend to very much agree with that, in a very unscientific way. But I am wondering about the issue of algorithms: are there algorithms that manipulate that into being a reality?

Dr Whittaker: My research, when it is not on incels, is on social media algorithms as well. I am just in the process, with my team, of completing a meta-review on about 50 studies looking at exactly that problem. We looked at all online harms, so we looked at extremism, hate speech, misinformation and disinformation, child sexual exploitation where we could find the studies—although they are a few and far between—then body image issues. Basically, what we found was that there is very little evidence to suggest that illegal content is being amplified, because for the most part in 2024, social media companies are pretty decent—not perfect—at getting rid of it.

But when it comes to what we might call legal but harmful—you know it when you see it, even though it is difficult to define—there is absolutely evidence. There are a couple that focus specifically on incels, showing that if you start engaging with incel content on YouTube or another platform, that you are a few clicks away or a few next-up videos away, before suddenly that is all that appears in your feeds. There is certainly something there from about the 50 or so studies that we could find from the last five years.

Dr Thomas: Incels are very much aware that other incels say these antagonistic things as a sort of cathartic release. In that sense, they probably do a better job at convincing outside observers that that is what incels believe, rather than incels themselves. That being said, you cannot be around extreme views for prolonged periods of time without that echo



chamber effect edging people upwards into, "Actually, okay, you've said that really extreme thing and I know that you're just kidding about that, but you've said that somewhat extreme thing; maybe you were serious about that one."

Q22 Kirsten Oswald: Do you think there is more that tech companies should be doing to protect people who are potentially vulnerable from some of this material?

Dr Whittaker: Clearly, yes, obviously. But the problem that you have specifically with incels is that they are not congregating, for the most part, on what the Digital Services Act refers to as, "Very large online platforms." It is not so easy. I forget how the Online Safety Act refers to it, just, large online platforms. I think there are 7 million users in the UK, is that right? Incels do not really have a huge presence there. Incels are more populating the fringe, their own bespoke websites like incel-specific ones, sometimes subreddits, although it does not usually take them too long to get booted from subreddits, and then Discord as well.

They should be doing more, but for the most part, these are platforms that exist outside the usual regulatory scope. I am sorry, the Chan boards are another very important one too. Going back to that question of recommendation algorithms, most of those platforms do not have recommendation algorithms. While there is certainly something there when it comes to amplification of bad content, a big part of it as well is the sorts of people who are inhabiting it, and usually a problem arises when those two things meet each other. But as is the case with these forums, you can be perfectly toxic without the help of any recommendation algorithms.

Q23 Kirsten Oswald: Do you think that there is any evidence that extreme incel content filters down into other parts of the internet? I hear what you are saying about these very specific parts, but it obviously stretches to some extent beyond that. Does that filter down and then radicalise men who would not describe themselves as incels, maybe following on from what Andrew said?

Dr Thomas: Yes. You have what I have come to call incel-adjacent men, who share some of the beliefs—they are much more numerous—who are aware of the communities, but would not necessarily define themselves by that label. It spreads outside, especially because incels use memes a lot, and memes, by their definition, spread quite readily. The other thing that happens, though, is as these things enter into the public consciousness, they tend to get twisted and distorted from their original intention as well. At the moment, people will use even the term incel itself as just a generic derogatory term aimed at men. We have seen examples online where women are calling men an incel because they are a man who is in a relationship who has done a bad thing. They are using a label, when that person is so far away from being an incel that the label does not really fit. It pushes into the public consciousness, but it gets distorted a little on the way as well.



Dr Whittaker: Going back to the question right at the start about that distinction between the red pill and the black pill: while incels might typically inhabit those deepest, darkest corners of the internet, red pill stuff is clearly on these platforms a lot. And as we mentioned at the start, they are not the same, there are quite distinct differences, but there is overlap as well. Influencers who shall not be named, and so on, they are clearly permeating the biggest social media platforms and are right there.

William Costello: Just a parenthetical thought to that is—going back to contextualising the risk of threat—yes, sexless young men constitute some risk, but are nowhere near as dangerous to women as jealous boyfriends or insecure boyfriends, who are very cost-inflicting to their partners. That is a far greater source of harm to women.

Q24 **Kirsten Oswald:** Looking at other groups who may be affected, to what extent do you think that the filtering down of incel culture is impacting on children and young people now?

Dr Thomas: I talked briefly about this earlier, in terms of this pipeline pathway to incelism. When you start getting into the nitty-gritty of incels one-on-one and talking to them, one thing is that you find a very similar story each time, which is that their perception of rejection starts very early on. Before it was within the context of heterosexual relationships and with women, it was in high school, and it was from other children, both boys and girls. The rejection starts there and the resentment towards normal people who can socialise when they cannot starts at that point. For me, that it is a very fruitful avenue for intervention.

But the reason I am bringing this up in relation to your question is because it is at that point where people are potentially more susceptible, “I am starting to get these negative feelings about myself, about others, about my capacity to relate to others.” And some of these memes, some of the cultural outputs from these communities, really speak to individuals who are in that position. Earlier on, there is probably that vulnerability to those ideas right back in high school. Incidentally, a lot of incels miss high school, they lament over high school, because they say that is the period where people learn all these social skills. They have a relationship that lasts a day, and they do all the silly things to learn how to socialise, and a lot of them say, “I missed out on that opportunity. I had no friends, or I was working really, really hard, and I didn’t get to do that. And now I’m in the outside world and things are real, I have no hope of developing and honing those skills.”

William Costello: But it is important to acknowledge which factors make being a member of the incel community attractive to them. They take a lot of positives out of it: they get a common enemy, they get fraternity with their fellow incels, and they get a rich lexicon of trolling language that they get great chagrin out of, especially when they see that filtering out into wider society. Interestingly, incels, in terms of their culture, have an outsized kind of influence on mainstream language. A lot of their terminology eventually gets mainstreamed, like blackpillling, or being



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blackpilled, is filtering into contemporary language on the internet. It is important to acknowledge what the appealing aspects of being an incel are that make them reluctant to let go of it. They are basically trading a position—competing in a mating market that they see as anxiety-inducing and not very rewarding—for all these positives that come with the incel identity.

Dr Whittaker: Given what we have said about the availability of at least incel-adjacent content on social media, given everything that Andrew and William have just said, it should certainly raise an alarm as to the current kind of content that is available; officially if you are 13, but as everyone will know, it is much easier to get on social media if you are younger than 13 as well. It is exactly as Andrew says: your brain is still forming, you are still trying to work out how to socialise, and you are trying to form your understanding of the world and things like that. That vast amount of content that is very easy to find online is particularly problematic. That is obviously one of the things the Online Safety Act is trying to curb. The proof will be in the pudding, I guess.

Dr Thomas: I guess the final thing to say, just off the back of both of those, is one of the things that community offers is a very simplistic view of the world, which then means you do not have to go through the taxing thing of trying to understand a very grey world that is full of inconsistencies. That might be one of the reasons why neurodivergent individuals who may be on the autistic spectrum are more drawn towards it, because it is quite a comforting thing to be able to categorise and form your world by a smaller number of very easy decisions and perspectives, than to appreciate it for the complex whirlwind that it really is.

William Costello: If there is an absence of alternative influencers helping young men understand how to navigate a complex dating market, they will turn to pick-up artists, they will turn to red pill content creators. Perhaps that could pave the way for some interventions as well. I always describe the dating market as a ruthless contest that you are thrown into when you become a teenager. You get no real preparation for it, and you have to learn your way through it through trial and error. That is not very comfortable for anyone in it. Perhaps we could do better in terms of education initiatives to help people prepare for the dating market.

Dr Thomas: One last very quick point, I am terribly sorry. Another issue is that, if you think about changes that have happened over the past few decades, there is now increasingly a dearth of spaces for young men to learn how to socialise and be young men. If you think about traditional organisations like Scouts, for example, you would have access to a positive role model of masculinity, engaging in positive tasks and learning how to socialise with your peers. I feel like, particularly post-covid, these sorts of opportunities are dying off. Individuals are learning how to socialise online through a screen in a very different way, and then they look for those male role models in places that maybe they should not.



Q25 Kirsten Oswald: Thank you very much for that. I have a couple of further questions, but on a very different topic. Maybe developing on your red pill, black pill conversations, to what extent do you think incel violence, either imagined or actual, is always directed at women?

William Costello: In the high-profile attacks, there is one that stands out as specifically targeting women only, and that is the Tallahassee yoga studio killing. The others have been lashing out at society more broadly. But the misogyny is very much directed towards women. Incels perceive women as living life on easy mode, and they resent them the most. There is an argument to say they also direct aggression in their online content towards just normies in society, and blue-pilled people more broadly, but the misogyny certainly is a unique harm to women.

Dr Whittaker: Just to jump on that, we asked our sample of incels who they considered the biggest enemy to incels, and the top two answers were feminists and the political left. But other answers well over half of the way up were wider society and men in general. There is clearly a lot of anger going in a lot of different directions. But it is also fair to say that the rhetoric is primarily not just women, but also specific types of women: feminists and things like that.

Dr Thomas: There are also strong associations between some of the incel forums and assisted suicide forums as well. If we are talking about physical acts of violence, that could be directed at the self. Of course, a lot of people do not necessarily realise that could potentially harm women as well, because behind every incel is a mother, and potentially a sister, a grandmother, an auntie, and a cousin. There is a family or a network around that individual, who could be harmed by them harming themselves.

Q26 Kirsten Oswald: Is there a greater risk of suicide among incels than there is of them causing harm to other people, do you think?

Dr Thomas: In the sample of incels we had, one in five were saying that they had daily thoughts of self-harm in the last two weeks. Comparing that with the 2014 Adult Psychiatry Morbidity Survey, that found that 5% of people in the general population had a suicidal thought in the past year. There is a really high incidence of self-harm. If you take away the daily part, and you just ask how many incels have thought about self-harm in the last week, it rises to about 80%. It is quite rife within that community compared with the general population.

Q27 Kirsten Oswald: Why is that the case? Why does suicide look particularly attractive to incels?

Dr Thomas: It is the hopelessness. The key characteristic of the black pill is that one gives up on things ever becoming any better, "I am in a position that I hate, and nothing is going to change and there is nothing that I can do about it." For some people, the intense negative emotions associated with that interpretation then leads them to think, "Well, would



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I prefer to not live rather than have these thoughts and feelings that I currently do?"

William Costello: There is also strong comorbidity between the depression, the anxiety, the autism, and the suicidal ideation. As I mentioned earlier, the two biggest risk factors for suicidal ideation in men are failing in mating goals and burdensomeness to kin, both of which are really salient for incels.

Dr Whittaker: One final problematic piece to this puzzle is that there is a culture of talking about suicide in a meaningful way as well. If you just go on the forum, you will likely see them sometimes talk in depth about their struggles with mental health, and suicide attempts and things like that, and sometimes telling each other to go and do it in a very horrible way. Studies on suicide have pretty reliably predicted that the more talk of suicide goes on, the more likely people are to act on it. When you have all these problems, combined with a community that is happy to talk about it, and happy to go into depth about it, it becomes a thing that can really blossom.

Dr Thomas: One thing that is not captured in the report is that I have been subjected to social media abuse from organisations that protest the assisted suicide forums. We get pushback on our incel research from organisations that take exception to the assisted suicide forums, because of the link between the assisted suicide forums and the incel forums.

Q28 **Chair:** I am interested to know, when incels are receiving CBT or similar help, if you like, how do they normally end up there? Do they get referred due to particular behaviours or do they self-refer?

Dr Thomas: First, I would say generally they are not; it is not happening at such frequency that incels are reaching out and saying, "I want help with these beliefs." Certainly not enough to derive any sort of meaning for what that looks like in the room and stuff like that. We have some statistics on Prevent referrals.

One thing that is quite interesting, and explains why we should maybe be doing this within the confines of, say, a CBT intervention, is that incels have a very interesting relationship with evidence, right? When you do CBT normally, the idea is that people have beliefs, but they do not really have evidence behind those beliefs. When you start challenging that, people realise that their beliefs are not grounded in evidence, and so they change their beliefs. Incels actually consider themselves to be research-informed. There is one Wikipedia page, [incels.wiki](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Incels.wiki), which has one page called Black Pill Science that has almost 200 peer-reviewed scientific journal articles referenced on there, with discourse accompanying each one, justifying and using that piece of evidence to support their beliefs.

These individuals, when they come in with their beliefs, they are very crystallised because they think they have the evidence on their side. Even if you can get them into the therapy space and start working, that would



be very tricky because you cannot introduce this idea of, "Let us look at the evidence," because a generalist practitioner who works with all sorts of issues will be bombarded with counter-evidence that supports those beliefs. I just wanted to say that and acknowledge that we probably do need to take a specialist look at this and do some specialist training for practitioners who are going to work with incels. In terms of what is happening in access to services, I do not know, Joe, whether you wanted to come in on that?

Dr Whittaker: Yes. Whenever you are talking about how incels end up getting support or intervention, the elephant in the room is Prevent. The Home Office has been counting incels as their own distinct group for two years, and they have made up about 1% of total referrals. Not huge, but certainly present. That usually equates to around 70 to 100 individuals who have been referred to Prevent. The problem is that our research and other research talks about things like mental health issues and neurodiversity and things like that—

Chair: We are going to move on to talk about that.

Dr Whittaker: Would you like me to hold up on that until you get there?

Chair: Please.

Dr Whittaker: Okay, I will not proceed then.

William Costello: I would just add that a further challenge in engaging incels in the therapeutic relationship is that strong need for recognition. Again, you are very likely to alienate an incel client if you overly challenge their world view. They would describe themselves as being gaslighted, if you cast any aspersions on the legitimacy of their difficulty. They would prefer it if you acknowledged, "Yes, it must be actually really tough." The example I use is that short men are often discriminated against in dating.

Dr Thomas: Just to be clear, that is talking more about initial stages. A strong therapeutic relationship over a course of therapy can withstand challenges to world view, and that is actually how you elicit change. But it takes a while, it is not a quick fix.

Q29 **Chair:** I suppose my thinking was that if you have people within that community who do not accept that they need any help or assistance in changing their views, then where do you start, and how do you get them into that place in the first place?

Dr Thomas: Yes. If I am honest, a lot of it is, "What would be the point of this? This is not going to get me access to a relationship." Part of it is actually starting with, "Well, can this do something for you regardless of that? Can this help you cope with those negative emotions perhaps?" The ironic thing being, of course, that if they improve their mental health, they will then socialise better, which might indirectly help with their problems.



Q30 Dame Jackie Doyle-Price: Running through all your evidence this afternoon has been the comorbidity with autism and poor mental health. Taking a helicopter view you can see why that is, because society does not work comfortably for people who are neurodivergent, and a lot of this activity takes place in the online world, which is an easier place for them to navigate, as you say. But it also exacerbates that and obviously exacerbates their mental health. But of course, not all incels are suffering with autism spectrum disorder. To what extent are vulnerable men in this category groomed and targeted by what is cultish behaviour? Do you want to go first, Joe?

Dr Whittaker: Yes. Again, going back to extremisms more broadly, I try to avoid the use of the word "groomed", mostly because what we see regardless of ideology is typically people who are actively seeking and engaging with this kind of content. It does not mean it never happens. There are obviously some people who are so vulnerable that they are manipulated in some way, which could be described using that word. But in the vast majority of cases, people are there of their own volition and have made active choices to get there. I would typically personally avoid the use of that word.

William Costello: There does not seem to be a very sophisticated recruitment campaign from incels. Yes, they do encourage other incels to take the black pill and are very demeaning towards what they describe as "cope", where people are deluding themselves. They encourage that nihilism, but regarding trying to radicalise others, it is not comparable to the way other extremist groups behave in trying to recruit.

Q31 Dame Jackie Doyle-Price: Is that not because we are basically talking about sex, which is a natural impulse, as opposed to a belief system like right-wing ideology? In that sense it is an easier cult to push because there is a biological impulse there, I do not know.

Dr Whittaker: I do not think you are wrong, but I still do not see that there is much evidence to suggest that there is anything that we could realistically call grooming. If anything, most incels for the most part want to be left alone. There really is no active recruitment. I researched jihadism; I researched the far right, where they are really concerned with increasing their numbers and getting people in via more formalised recruitment. That really does not exist when it comes to incels. That is typically why I would avoid using that kind of language.

William Costello: And importantly, it is necessary for those groups to recruit because they have a clear, collectively agreed-upon end goal that involves political violence. That is absent from incels as a community.

Q32 Dame Jackie Doyle-Price: Well, there is actual physical violence. But if we are talking about misogyny, which is a cultural phenomenon, it does not play out in terms of an end goal like that. It just plays out in a continual hostile society, and you are sitting talking to a group of women who are all very familiar with that.



Dr Whittaker: But I really, really agree with that, which is why—I made this point a little earlier—we should minimise the focus on incels and realise first that misogyny undercuts every single extremist movement. And to be frank, it is completely rife within society as well. This small group of a number in the tens of thousands worldwide is only a tiny, infinitesimally small piece of the wider puzzle of misogyny. You are completely right, it is an ideology and world view, but it is so prevalent that inherent—

Q33 **Dame Jackie Doyle-Price:** But that kind of makes my point, because if we refer to influencers who we will not name and give them the credibility, we are talking about a vulnerable group of people who are feeling alienated from society, taking comfort from sitting online, finding a community that is giving them comfort because there are other people like them. That group of people are being used by more clever, violent misogynists to advance that ideology, are they not?

Dr Whittaker: Yes, but again, it is really important to note the difference between red pill influencers and black pill incels. Because those red pill influencers are absolutely trying to increase their clout, or whatever you want to call it. They are absolutely trying to spread their message as far as possible, they are absolutely trying to find followers; usually for financial gain, which is something else to talk about when it comes to social media. Incels do not really fit that bill in the same way. Again, they just want to occupy a small corner of the internet, they want to post admittedly very toxic, bad things. But I would urge to treat the two separately analytically.

Q34 **Dame Jackie Doyle-Price:** But it is the same, is it not? We are concerned that we are referring these people to Prevent rather than giving them mental health support. But it is actually the same, because if you talk about people who perpetrate, let us say, right-wing terrorist attacks that lead to murder, they are just as vulnerable as the people who we are talking about in terms of incel culture, who are being used by—

Dr Thomas: That is right. Two points very quickly. First, the way that I tend to see this is in an ideal world, I would not want someone to have to get to the point where a teacher wants to make a Prevent referral about them before we intervene. I take exception to that, inasmuch as we should not wait to administer or give mental health support via Prevent, because at that point it has gone so far down the line; why are not we doing some stuff earlier on?

The other thing that is not captured in this report, which you might find useful, is that we found some provisional statistical evidence that we have more sub-groupings within the community. One over here that has that neurodivergence, bullying history, they see their mate value as poor—that category that you were talking about. But we also seem to have a separate category of high dark triad, dark personality traits: psychopathy, Machiavellianism, narcissism, and right-wing political views.



What is interesting is statistically they seem pulled apart. You are not getting that many who are high dark triad who are also autistic, and you are not getting many who are high right-wing who are also bullied. Personally, I am more scared about this category over here.

Dame Jackie Doyle-Price: Yes, of course.

Dr Thomas: I would not want our thinking to dwell too much on the neurodivergent side without reflecting on that. I want to very quickly say one final thing, because I will kick myself for not saying it: people often say that this is about sex, but it is not about sex. We have interviewed incels who have gone to see prostitutes, and it has made no difference to them whatsoever. Because for them, it is about feeling like they are worthy enough to be chosen for a relationship—whether that is sexual or otherwise—by someone else.

Dame Jackie Doyle-Price: Interesting.

William Costello: Yes. To the extent that it is about mating, mating constitutes more than just sex. Like Andrew said, it is being sexually selected that is important.

Q35 **Dame Jackie Doyle-Price:** Yes. It is about social relationships actually, is it not? That is what it is about. That is why people on the spectrum are so vulnerable to this. You have taken me to where I wanted to go actually, which is that I have a very firm view that society does not work well for people with neurodivergent conditions, and I do not think we do enough to equip them with the tools to help themselves. It is perhaps worse now than it has ever been because, as we have all said, it is really easy now to sit on your own in a room with a screen in front of you, whereas in the old days we used to go out and play when we were kids, so you would find ways of building those social skills. You alluded earlier to post-lockdown and the pandemic and all those things.

As you have just characterised, in terms of separating the vulnerable people who find comfort in the incel movement, should we say, rather than who are actually really ideologically unpleasant. We need to be able to separate them off, do we not? And Prevent perhaps is not the tool. It has to be about giving people the tools to not get to that space.

Dr Thomas: One thing that people forget—this is not about incels specifically now—is we say the term “social skills”, but a lot of the time you may as well be saying “social talents” to people. People neglect the fact that skill is in there, and skills need to be honed and practised and maintained. There has been some really good work by a colleague of ours, Professor Norman Li from Singapore, showing that through group settings, through training, you can actually improve the mating performance of non-incel men; just men who are struggling with relationships. Will might say a bit more about that because it was training them for speed dating, right?



William Costello: Yes, that is right. There was also another intervention specifically targeting young men with autism to try to improve their romantic competency, which also had some efficacy. Given that we know there is such a link between perceiving yourself as low mate value and misogyny, that could be a level at which we could intervene. Because those two things likely have a bidirectional effect too, which can maybe be summed up by the Jim Morrison song lyric, "Women seem wicked when you're unwanted." That sums up the incel misogyny attitude. The broader literature that refers to that link between perceiving yourself as low mate value and misogyny, that applies to men in general, not just incels. And the bidirectional effect I refer to is that women tend not to want to date misogynists. It has a cyclical effect, whereby you perceive yourself as lower mate value, become more misogynistic, get more rejection. Breaking that cycle would be important.

Dr Thomas: Just to be clear on that point, there is scope to help young men who are maybe neuro-atypical with their social skills, before they have even developed misogynistic beliefs, before they go down that path.

Q36 **Dame Jackie Doyle-Price:** It starts with childhood, does it not?

Dr Thomas: Exactly.

Dame Jackie Doyle-Price: Before they even need to feel validated by their relationships with others.

William Costello: I would add as well, Andrew, that in our data, the indirect pathway from autism to harmful beliefs was specifically when it was combined with bullying. That reflects other data too, showing that individual incels with an autism diagnosis are most likely to report feeling violent and misogynistic when it is combined with a reported history of bullying. To echo your point about society not being very helpful towards neurodivergent people, that comes through in our data too.

Q37 **Dame Jackie Doyle-Price:** Yes. Coming back to your comorbidities, if we reverse that, so we try to equip people with the tools to help them navigate the world, symptomatic of those would be a house and a job. If we were able to make sure that we were giving that amount of support, how effective would that be in tackling this culture?

Dr Thomas: They are all entwined, right? The reason people are enabled to have a good job and a house, is in part because they are functioning as best they can socially.

Q38 **Dame Jackie Doyle-Price:** But it is still that social support, is it not? It comes back to that every time.

Dr Thomas: Yes. I was not sure whether you were saying if we took people who are struggling with social skills and just gave them a job and a house, they would be okay.

Dame Jackie Doyle-Price: No, no.



Dr Thomas: But if we went a bit further up from that and built up their social skills, not just within a romantic context, but in a social context, then of course that is going to unlock a whole host of things. If you feel like you are thriving in society, if you feel like you are in a good place, it is easier to feel like other people are good in the world as well, “I am okay and therefore you are okay.”

William Costello: Yes, and improving the material conditions of young men’s lives might have some impact for sure, given that we have found research that shows incel activity is most prevalent in areas of high income inequality. That is certainly worth thinking about.

Q39 **Dame Jackie Doyle-Price:** I say this because I have felt for a long time that people with learning disabilities and autism do not get the support early enough, and society needs to grasp that that brings with it long-term problems for wider society.

Dr Whittaker: It has really been exacerbated in the mobile phone and social media age as well. I think it was you who made the example earlier that we used to just go out and play, and neurodiverse people just had to do it and learn the law of the jungle. Now there is an option just to stay in on a device and be subject to that algorithmically driven world. And while it may be comforting on some level to pick and choose your social interactions on your device, it is probably not beneficial to your long-term thriving.

Dr Thomas: Sending it to the other end for a moment as well, incels will benefit from getting out into the real world and forming relationships that are not necessarily romantic. Because if you have very strong opinions about 50% of the population, i.e. women, that are very rigid—all women think this and all women act this way—the more you can subject them to counterexamples of that by going to the supermarket, and going for a drink with people after work, and having a normal life, the better. But I have met incels who, even if they have a job, it is a job where it puts them in a position where they do not have to talk to many people. It is a remote job, with a very small team of other men who are maybe also neurodivergent. How can we put them in positions that naturally give them counter-evidence to what is fuelling the beliefs they have?

Q40 **Dame Jackie Doyle-Price:** Yes, it is a social intervention really, is it not? We are looking at it from the perspective of incel culture now, but you could look at it from the perspective of self-harm, you could look at it from the perspective of, say, extreme ideologies, or gender ideology being another one. If we are just going to let this situation happen where people are encouraged to sit at home in their rooms with computers, all these extreme situations are just going to thrive, are they not? Let us be frank. We see this over and over again with people who have other comorbidities.

Dr Thomas: We work at universities. One of the things that was most apparent to me after covid was that the first generation of students that I



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had through the door could not make eye contact with me, after a couple of years of what happened. Those skills get rusty quite quickly. I understand the call for societal-level intervention, but it also really needs to be on a personal level, "How can we help you? How can we support you?"

Dame Jackie Doyle-Price: It does not help if we are leaving people within the context of their own families. Sometimes those families can think they are doing their loved one a favour by protecting them like that, but it could make that situation worse.

Dr Whittaker: I agree.

Q41 **Dame Jackie Doyle-Price:** Do you have any examples of interventions that have been effective?

William Costello: That is a wide-open area for future research that is sorely needed. We have some speculative ideas of stuff we would love to try. Again, the research to examine the trajectories of incel exit forum users could be very informative. But yes, it requires longitudinal research and more data.

Dr Thomas: I have some success at a personal level with my clients with CBT-grounded interventions, but nothing that we have been able to package up as a formal scientific study yet.

Dr Whittaker: Just trying to avoid the securitised counter-terrorism thing might be more likely to yield some level of success. It is difficult, there clearly is some level of national security need when we are talking about high-casualty terrorist attacks every now and again. But it might be that for a lot of incels that it is exactly the wrong type of intervention for them.

Dame Jackie Doyle-Price: Yes, absolutely, because it could make them more withdrawn. That is very interesting. Thank you very much indeed. Thank you, Chair.

Chair: Thank you. That concludes the questions from the Committee today. If you have anything further that you wish to add, please do write to the Committee. Thank you for coming. Your evidence was very interesting; a little dark and a little scary, but very helpful to us.