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Why isn't There More Incel Violence?

William Costello¹ · David M. Buss¹

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Abstract

Incels (involuntary celibates) are an online subculture community of men who form an identity around their perceived inability to form sexual or romantic relationships. They attribute their lack of success to genetic factors, evolved mate preferences, and social inequities. While we have a deep ancestral history of incels, the modern incel community is an evolutionarily novel group that fosters a shared victimhood identity. We applaud Lindner for an important contribution to the scant literature on incels and highlight the importance of her evolutionary psychological lens in understanding their grievances. Our critique of Lindner's work addresses two key issues. Firstly, we challenge the hypothesis that incels engage in simulated coalitional bargaining for sexual access. While coalitional bargaining for sexual access may have played a role in ancestral populations of involuntarily celibate men, this is not a suitable analysis of modern incels. Instead, the incel community operates as a fatalistic echo-chamber, where failure is celebrated, and individuals discourage each other from pursuing romantic success. Secondly, we critique the association between incels and violence. Contrary to common beliefs, empirical evidence suggests that incels are not particularly prone to violence. Incels' propensity for violence appears relatively low compared to that of the general population. We conclude by offering one hypothesis as to why modern day incels are not as violent as we might expect. The Male Sedation Hypothesis, that online virtual worlds, such as pornography, may pacify the potential for violence among sexless young men, providing a counterfeit sense of sexual fulfillment and reducing motivation for real-life mate competition.

Keywords Incels · Extremism · Violence · Mating · Misogyny

✉ William Costello
williamcostello@utexas.edu

¹ Individual Differences and Evolutionary Psychology, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, USA

Finding and retaining a mate represent persistent adaptive problems for humans. Modern humans descend from an unbroken evolutionary chain of ancestors who successfully solved these problems. It seems somewhat paradoxical, therefore, that there is a growing community of men who strongly identify with their perceived *inability* to solve these adaptive problems – involuntary celibates (incels).

Incels are a primarily online sub-culture community of men who forge a sense of identity around their perceived inability to form sexual or romantic relationships. The incel community operates almost exclusively online, providing an outlet to express misogynistic hostility, frustration and blame society for a perceived failure to include them (Speckhard et al., 2021).

Incels believe that genetic factors, evolved mate preferences, and inequitable social structures restrict their access to sexual relationships with women (Brooks et al., 2022). They believe that most women are attracted to a small number of men (who they refer to as “Chads”), who monopolize sexual encounters, while the “genetically inferior” incels are excluded from mating (Baselice, 2023).

In this sense, incels represent somewhat of a paradox, and to our knowledge a somewhat evolutionarily novel group of men. We have a deep evolutionary history of involuntarily celibate men. Indeed, genetic evidence reveals that in every generation, most women reproduce whereas only a subset of men reproduce (Betzig, 2012). Modern incels, however, appear unique in galvanizing a shared victimhood identity around their sexless and mateless circumstance.

We applaud Lindner for an important contribution to the scant literature on incels. We agree with her assessment that an evolutionary psychological lens is most useful in analyzing the problems that incels represent in society. Indeed, some of the most informative research on incels has come from the evolutionary social sciences. These include findings around the local mating ecology conditions that predict greater online incel activity (Brooks et al., 2022), an evolutionary perspective on incels’ mental health (Costello et al., 2022), predictions about incels’ mating psychology (Costello et al., 2023), and evolutionary informed analyses on the dangers posed by incels (Blake & Brooks, 2022; Baselice, 2023).

Incels often selectively co-opt findings from evolutionary psychology, sometimes distorting them, to fuel their misogynistic worldview. We echo Lindner’s point that “...the incel community’s preoccupation with evolutionary psychology does not compromise the value of evolutionary psychology in explaining the movement’s grievances.” (Lindner, *in press*, p.5).

Lindner’s contribution succinctly synthesizes ideas we have each been exploring in our own work, that is framing incels as one symptom of a broader mating crisis, in which women’s socio-economic success, combined with their evolved mate-preferences for higher status mates, creates a culturally skewed sex-ratio of highly educated and selective women, and a lack of men who meet women’s standards on the mating market (Buss, 2016; Costello, 2022).

We could go on with our praise of Lindner’s excellent article, but in the interest of an engaging collegial dialogue we focus on two issues:

1. We challenge the hypothesis of conceptualizing incels as (simulated) coalitional bargaining for sexual access.

2. We discuss an unresolved puzzle: Given what we know about the Young Male Syndrome, why isn't there more incel violence?

Simulated coalitional bargaining for sexual access

Our primary source of conceptual disagreement with the author is the suggestion that “incel ideology can be construed as simulated coalitional bargaining for sexual access (i.e., excess, low-status men ‘joining forces’ with like-minded others against those who more successfully interact with members of the opposite sex)” (Linder, *in press*, p. 25). The author points to evidence throughout the animal kingdom, and in our ancestral history, of lower status males galvanizing together to overthrow high-status males. The suggestion is that, ancestrally, groups of incels would have overthrown Chads if they began to monopolize sexual encounters with the females in the group.

Although coalitional bargaining for sexual access may have been a recurring feature of our ancestral history, it does not appear to explain the behavior of modern day incels. Costello (2023) outlines how incels seem to actively hold each other back and resent each other for “ascending” (incel parlance for achieving romantic success). Modern incels do indeed appear to be engaging in coalitional psychology such as group identity and out-group enmity, but we find little or no evidence that they join, use, or motivate this coalition to bargain for sexual access.

Instead, the incelsphere can be characterized as a fatalistic echo-chamber in which misery and failure are celebrated (Kates, 2021). Incels appear sincere in not wanting other incels (or even themselves) to achieve romantic success. Incels encourage each other to “lay down and rot,” accept that “it’s over,” and advocate taking the “black pill.” The black pill describes a particular worldview with a bleak perceived truth—the belief that sexual attraction is mainly fixed and that incels can do nothing to improve their romantic prospects (Glance et al., 2021). Incels’ resentment toward other incels for ascending, and their own resistance to the pursuit of romantic success, seems to run counter to the idea of (even simulated) coalitional bargaining for sexual access.

Juxtaposed with the anxiety they experience from real-world engagement with the mating market, which motivates a retreat from it, incel identity seems to provide a sense of fraternity (Crimando, 2019), virtuous victimhood identity (Ok et al., 2021), a common enemy (Lindsay, 2022), and a rich lexicon of humorous in-group terminology (Gothard, 2020). Incels often experience pressures to avoid being labeled a fake member of the community. Members of online incel forums often limit other members from engaging with the mating market, even banning them from the forum if they report any semblance of romantic success (Hinds, 2022). In sum, although we concur with Lindner that inceldom appears to hijack men’s evolved coalitional psychology, we do not find compelling evidence for a link to bargaining for sexual access.

Do incels have a propensity for violence?

The author draws allusions to incel ideology and violent extremism. The empirical evidence for such a link is less clear. Firstly, we must put the extent of incel violence into context and compare it to other terrorist groups, as it has been suggested that incels should be categorized as a terrorist threat (Hoffman et al., 2020). Reports now number incel membership in the United States from around 40,000 (Beauchamp, 2019) to hundreds of thousands (Kutchinsky, 2019), and at the time of writing there are ~20,000 active users of the main forum Incels.is. It is estimated that incels have killed ~59 people worldwide (Hoffman et al., 2020). In contrast, the similarly sized (~15,000 members) Islamist terrorist group Boko Haram, has killed an estimated 350,000 people since 2002 (Amnesty International, 2015; Reuters, 2023). The incel study with the current largest sample size ($n=274$) found that incel ideology was only weakly correlated with radicalization. Most incels in the study ($n=219$, 80%) actually completely rejected violence (Moskalenko et al., 2022). Another report from the International Centre for Counterterrorism used LIWC (Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count) software (Pennebaker, 2001) to analyze language in incel, MGTOW (Men Going Their Own Way), pick up artist, and right-wing forums. Just 1.39% of incel posts could be categorized as legitimizing violence, the second lowest of the four groups (Perlinger et al., 2023). Lindner appears to suggest that support for violence is ubiquitous in the incelsphere, calling for “future research to explore whether incels genuinely support these attacks or whether they feel strong saying they support it – i.e., outside these forums, would they actually advocate or take steps to enable this kind of violence?” (Lindner, [in press](#), p.39). Moskalenko et al. (2022) asked incels (scored on a fivepoint scale, with 1 = “not at all”, and 5 = “very much”) about attitudes relevant to Incel violence. The average incel score for the specific item “I admire Elliot Rodger for his Santa Barbara attack,” was ($M=1.83$; $SD=1.25$). We concur with Lindner that the evidence suggests that extreme inceldom looks more like suicidality than violence toward others. The two strongest correlates of male suicidal ideation are, failure in heterosexual mating and burdensomeness to kin (de Catanzaro, 1995). Both factors are extremely salient for incels, many of whom report to be NEET (not in education, employment, or training) and still living with their parents into adulthood (Costello et al., 2022). The key point is that there does not seem to be compelling evidence, despite a small number of highly florid cases that received tremendous news attention, that incels are particularly prone to violence.

What about sexual violence?

Sparks and colleagues. (2022; 2023) suggest that the term incel has resulted in an overemphasis on the sexual frustration aspects of incel identity. This overemphasis has led many, including the author, to speculate about the sexual violence threat presented by incels. The author writes...

...incels justify sexual violence against women by arguing that women are to be used for sexual intercourse: if they will not provide sex to men, it is a man’s right to take it from them...Many incels believe that they must act to take con-

trol of their lives and exact revenge for the dismissive way they were treated by women (Lindner, [in press](#), p. 35).

Even in the high-profile cases of incel violence, however, there has been a conspicuous absence of sexual violence. This is in line with the lack of support in the literature for the mate deprivation hypothesis of rape. Most men who commit acts of sexual violence are not men considered to be low in mate value, but rather men who are higher in status and power, already sexually successful, and can get away with a sexually coercive strategy with fewer negative repercussions (Buss, 2021). High profile examples include Harvey Weinstein, Bill Cosby, and Jeffrey Epstein. A common measure used to ascertain men's propensity for sexual violence is to ask about their willingness to rape if you could get away with it. Contrary to the mate deprivation hypothesis of sexual violence, incels score significantly lower than the general population in this measure. Speckhard et al. (2021) found that 13.6% of incels reported some willingness to rape if they could get away with it. Conversely, ~35%, ~20–25%, ~19% and ~30% of men in the general population, respectively, reported some willingness to rape if they could get away with it (Malamuth, 1981; Palmer et al., 2021; Hahnel-Peeters et al., 2022; Young & Thiessen, 1992). In sum, even when it comes to sexual violence specifically, incels do not appear to be more likely, and in fact may be less likely, to commit it.

A puzzling question: Why are incels not more violent?

Throughout her paper, Lindner provides robust evidence for what is known in the evolutionary psychology literature as the Young Male Syndrome, i.e., the tendency for surplus populations of unpartnered young men to disproportionately harm society due to increased status striving and risk-taking behaviors in pursuit of mates (Wilson & Daly, 1985). Yet there has been no spike in violence corresponding with increasing rates of sexlessness (Pinker, 2012, 2018; Räsänen, 2023). Given what we know about the Young Male Syndrome, the more puzzling question is, why is there not more incel violence?

Fleischman (2020) suggests that modern men may have their status striving mechanisms hijacked and undermined by online virtual worlds, such as video games and pornography. Pornography may provide *counterfeit fitness cues* to men that their sexual needs are being met, with lower costs compared to the anxiety inducing real-life competitive mating market. Environmental cues suggesting that risky strategies are unnecessary for reproductive success weaken the motivation behind these impulses. This could be one explanation for the observed decrease in sexual assault rates associated with the increasing prevalence of pornography (Kutchinsky, 1973, 1991; Diamond, 1999; Diamond et al., 2011).

We offer one speculative hypothesis as to why there does not appear to be a corresponding spike in violence, both sexual and non-sexual, alongside increasing rates of sexlessness. We propose what has been referred to in popular media as the *Male Sedation Hypothesis*—that online worlds have a pacifying effect, perhaps by taking the motivational edge off of engaging in real-life mate competition, on the potentiality for violence among sexless young men (Williamson, 2022). Future research is

needed to test whether this, perhaps in combination with other hypotheses such as environmental pollutants that decrease testosterone levels, can explain the puzzle of lower levels of sexual and non-sexual violence.

Conclusion

We commend Lindner's important contribution to understanding incels through an evolutionary psychological lens. We differ from her analysis in two ways: the conceptualization of incels as (simulated) coalitional bargaining for sexual access, and the link between incels and violence.

We argue that modern incels engage in a fatalistic echo-chamber that celebrates failure and discourages the pursuit of mating opportunities. Incels prioritize the validation of their negative self-view, perhaps obtaining psychological but not real-life benefits of coalitional membership, over actual coalitional bargaining for sexual access.

We also question the extent of incel violence, which seems to be relatively rare compared to other terrorist groups. There is only weak evidence of a correlation between incel ideology and radicalization, and based on current evidence, the majority of incels seem to reject violence, including sexual violence. We concur with Lindner that extreme incelism resembles suicidality rather than violence towards others. We emphasize that incels typify the two largest correlates of male suicidal ideation, failure in heterosexual mating, and burdensomeness to kin.

Finally, we pose a thought-provoking question: Why is there not more incel violence given what is known historically and cross-culturally about the Young Male Syndrome? We speculate that online virtual worlds, such as pornography, may pacify the potential for violence among sexless young men. The Male Sedation Hypothesis suggests that these virtual experiences provide counterfeit fitness cues of sexual needs being met, and thus reduce the motivation for engaging in real-life mating effort as well as engaging in risky behaviors.

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Declarations

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