

Incels: between mass murders and terrorism?

La comunità incel tra stragi e terrorismo

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Abstract

In recent years there has been a significant change in the implementation methods and ideological substrates of mass murders; a phenomenon that has affected both the United States and Europe. A specific movement stands out for its peculiarities: the "Incels" community, unknown to most and which has raised little interest in the academic world. This work aims at deepening the knowledge on this phenomenon, the underlying ideology and the personological characteristics of those who consider themselves "Involuntary Celibates". Starting from the analysis of the literature on the subject, which is still rather scarce today, an attempt has been made to understand the criminogenesis and criminodynamics of these actions, reporting and commenting on case studies so far connected to the movement, analyzing the fundamental role played by social media and that of hypothetical preventive strategies.

Keywords: incels, terrorism, mass murder, criminology, mental health.

Riassunto

Negli ultimi anni c'è stato un cambiamento significativo nei metodi di attuazione e nei substrati ideologici degli omicidi di massa; un fenomeno che ha colpito sia gli Stati Uniti che l'Europa. Un movimento specifico si distingue per le sue peculiarità: la comunità degli "Incels", sconosciuta ai più e che ha suscitato scarso interesse per il mondo accademico. Questo lavoro mira ad approfondire la conoscenza di questo fenomeno, l'ideologia di base e le caratteristiche personologiche di coloro che si considerano "celibi involontari". A partire dall'analisi della letteratura sull'argomento, che è ancora piuttosto scarsa oggi, è stato fatto un tentativo di comprendere la criminogenesi e la criminodinamica di queste azioni, riferendo e commentando casi di studio finora collegati al movimento, analizzando il ruolo fondamentale giocato dai social media e quello di ipotetiche strategie preventive.

Parole chiave: incels, terrorismo, strage, criminologia, salute mentale.

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Incels: between mass murders and terrorism?

Introduction

In the past decades there have been multiple episodes of mass murder, many of which were motivated by reasons connected to terrorism (Gianfrotta, 2017).

For example, what happened in Italy in the Seventies (the so-called “years of lead”), where several organizations operated with the declared aim of subverting the state order. A similar experience characterized Germany and other European countries, such as Ireland and Spain, in the same period. We cannot forget the years when Islamic terrorism was responsible for violent attacks across Europe: just think of what happened in Munich in 1972 (Silke & Filippidou, 2019) or in Fiumicino (Rome) in 1973 and 1985 (Praduroux, 2015).

As for more recent years it is impossible not to mention the 2001 Twin Towers attack, the 2004 Madrid massacre, and the 2016 Nice tragedy: all episodes claimed by the terrorist organization called *Al Qaeda*¹.

What these episodes have in common is a strong ideological trait, albeit with nuances that are sometimes more clear-cut religious or political, but which are in any case united by the aim of changing the established social and political structure.

Most actions are related to the so-called *Jihad*, a radical and extreme vision of Islamism that justifies and legitimizes the use of violence by creating a profound distinction between the “faithful” to be protected and the “infidels” to fight (Travaini, Regondi, Camisasca, Caruso, Merzagora, 2017; Merzagora, Travaini, Caruso 2016). The *Jihad*'s final objective is to obtain a geopolitical change through the birth of a state, the Islamic one.

There have also been massacres that are peculiar because of the difficulty to connect them with the sadly and most publicly known terrorist scenario: for example the Norwegian one at the hands of Anders Breivik², who killed seventy-seven people, motivated – as stated by the same author during trial – by the desire to raise the population's awareness with respect to the threats of the Labor party and to stop “a deconstruction of the Norwegian culture due to the mass immigration of Muslims” (Magnay, 2012); school shootings, (Reeping, Cerdá, Kalesan, Wiebe, Galea, & Branas, 2019), a phenomenon that mostly belongs to USA, in which attacks at educa-

tional institutions, involving the use of firearms, are usually made by one student attending the same institution. This topic has sparked a political debate over regulation of firearms in the United States and how easily minors have access to guns.

And, finally, we also refer to the extremist fringes of the so-called “Incel movement”, characterized by a strong intolerance, a profound attack on what is different in personological and social terms, an anachronistic regression (as we will see later) in terms of social modernity.

To better understand the meaning of these first reflections, we will go into a more in-depth analysis of this phenomenon which can be of help to better outline the common features highlighted above.

The Incel Rebellion has already begun!³

What is meant by “Incel”? The neologism results from the union of two words: *involuntary* and *celibate*. We are therefore talking about involuntary celibates, but there is much more to be said in addition to the literal translation.

Before going into its description, however, it is essential to clarify an important aspect in terms of methodology. We are facing a definitional problem, since there is little information about the phenomenon, which was born rather recently (early 2000s) on the internet, where it continues to develop and grow today. This led to a rather scarce “official” academic literature on the subject (Ging, 2019; Saptura & Boyle, 2019; Baele, Brace & Coan, 2019), but since the phenomenon has long been in the spotlight of the media, there are online articles and blog publications, posts on social and non-social platforms about it. For this reason, what is reported in this short article will mainly be based on the acquisition of documents such as newspapers, encyclopedias, interviews, and news clips uploaded on Youtube, consultation of community posts and forums on the topic. This is clarified for methodological transparency, but it should be noted that this type of modality is not new in the field of criminological research (Bandini, 2017; Travaini, Caruso & Merzagora, 2019).

Given this premise, it is possible to outline the demographic features of these Incels. Some articles describe them as heterosexual white males, often unemployed, living with their parents. Since many of these subjects act on websites that are difficult to reach, it is not possible to

1 TeSat2017, Terrorism Situation and Trend Report, available at: <https://www.europol.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/tesat2017.pdf>.

2 See <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-14265094>.

3 From a Facebook post on Alek Minassian's profile.

make a precise estimate of the actual size of the movement today.

The word “incel” was coined in 1993 by a girl (ironically), Alana, who had called her blog “Alana Involuntary Celibacy Project”, and where she used to describe her sexual inactivity and the difficulty of her love and affective life as a high school student⁴.

From that blog an Incel themed mailing list was created in 1997, for all those who were alone, had not yet had sexual experiences or had not had affective relationships for a long time, a list accessible to both boys and girls.

This “project” led to the birth of a real online subculture⁵, that has nothing in common with the original concept of Incel. This subculture mainly consists of young males without a partner, often virgins and with great interaction difficulties with the opposite sex, their uneasiness expressed by blaming women and their conquest of sexual freedom through content full of misogynist, racist resentment, referable to what in jargon is called “Manosphere”. Manosphere refers to a complex of websites, online communities, forums, and groups on the main social platforms oriented towards a particular vision of masculinity. It includes websites about men’s rights (referable to recent men’s rights movements⁶) and about the art of seducing a woman, as well as some bodybuilding and men’s fashion blogs. It is a very multifaceted web phenomenon, whose most innocuous part includes websites and blogs that advise on dating and sex, or discuss legal issues that involve men in their role as fathers and husbands (such as rights on child custody). Its most “extreme” part, on which we focus our interest, is characterized by contents marked by *slut-shaming*⁷, women’s hatred, the celebrations of mass murderers and anti-feminist massacres and (to a lesser extent) a homophobic rhetoric that recalls that of many fundamentalist movements.

Characteristics of the Incel group

The current Incel community is founded on the sharing of certain values, codes and precise terminologies, which contribute to creating compactness and emotional closeness among its members.

The shared ideology is primarily based on anti-feminist and misogynistic concepts: in fact, the discussions in the different threads of the most common Incel platforms,

are mostly focused on the sexual liberation of women and how it caused the involuntary celibacy status for many “non alpha males”, but also on loneliness, suicide, *look-smaxing*⁸, sexual surrogate robots paid for by the state or justified rape (Beauchamp, 2019). There are many posts about Darwinian laws of sexual selection in which the Incels, genetically unsuitable to predominate, suffer from the advantages women have (ranging from gained sexual liberation to the use of make-up)⁹. The predominant theory is called LMS, or Look, Money and Status: according to this theory, the attraction between a man and a woman does not depend on factors such as character compatibility, personal taste in the choice of the partner or physical affinity, but from the Looks (beauty in an objective sense), from Money, or one’s wealth, and from the Status, that is, the position held on the social scale by an individual in their environment. LMS supporters are convinced that the beginning and the continuation of intimate relationships is the result of a weighted average between the factors L, M and S. If the value obtained is insufficient, the man will be rejected in the courtship phase or, if already in a relationship, this relationship will be interrupted and he will be replaced by a subject with higher L, M and S values¹⁰.

Also important is the so-called Black Pill Theory, borrowed from the “Matrix” movie, which distinguishes the Incel movement from other communities belonging to the Manosphere: the Black Pill is the set of theories and conceptions that refer to biological determinism, fatalism and defeatism to which unattractive males are condemned. In the context of the Men’s Rights Movements, we instead refer to the Red Pill, which indicates the will to see the true reality of things, contrary to what happens when taking the Blue Pill, which contributes to building a world of illusions.

Another element of fundamental importance in the Incel community is the shared use of a particular lexicon, a few examples of which are mentioned below.

Chad: representation of the male “par excellence”, the alpha male; rich, objectively beautiful, and highly positioned on the social ladder.

Normie: the common person, term used with a negative connotation.

Betabuxx: men with a below average appearance who manage to have a relationship only by ensuring the partner economic support.

Stacy: more attractive than the average girl and therefore hyper selective.

Becky: inconspicuous girl with modest behavior.

4 See <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-45284455>.

5 Alana completely distanced herself from the Incel movement, creating a new project: “Love, not anger”.

6 Movement of the 70s, which originated in the United States from the split of the liberation of men movement: on the one hand, the movement took a pro-feminist direction; on the other, it proclaimed itself anti-feminist and from this fringe the men’s rights movements to which we refer here developed.

7 *Slut-shaming* is the process by which women are attacked for their transgression of social codes of sexual conduct or admonished for behaviors or desires that are more sexual than society finds acceptable. See A. Evans, 2013.

8 *Looksmaxing* indicates all attempts and strategies to improve one’s physical appearance: from gym exercises to cosmetic surgery.

9 Scaggs, A. (2018). *Sex redistribution and the means of reproduction*. FT Alphaville. Available at: <https://ftalphaville.ft.com/2018/05/08/1525779677000/-Sex-redistribution—and-the-means-of-reproduction/>.

10 *Cosa attrae le donne: la teoria LMS*, available at: www.ilredpillatore.org.

This reality is not new to the online world. On the contrary, the typical features of the internet often act as a catalyst for feelings of hatred, which are affected and worsened by the so-called echo chamber effect (Verza, 2019). Unfortunately, however, the Incel movement has not stopped at the online sharing of misogynist hatred and resentment: some Incels, in fact, have acted out.

From virtual reality to real massacre: attacks by Incels

All of this might seem somewhat disturbing, but perhaps more interesting on a psycho-social level rather than on the criminological one, if it were not for the fact that the ideological basis of some actions is covered in brutal criminal violence. We refer to the multiple episodes of mass murder and violent attacks in North America claimed by members of the Incel community.

May 23, 2014. **Elliot Rodger** (22) kills six people by gunshot and injures fourteen others in Isla Vista, California, near the University of California campus. He shoots himself. By the Incel community he is considered a martyr (they call him “The Saint”) for several reasons: firstly, because he was the first Incel to carry out a massacre after illustrating his detailed plan in a Youtube video, posted shortly before the event, where he explained that he would get rid of as many Chads and Stacys as possible; secondly, because he wrote a manifesto called “My twisted world”, which became a reference document for the whole Incel community. In these 137 pages, Elliot describes his life of loneliness and lack of sex and relationships with women, and explains in detail how the day of retribution will come, his personal plan for: *“implementing everything in my power to destroy everything I’ve never had. All the girls who refused me (...) I will destroy them. All those popular people who live hedonistic and pleasant lives, I will destroy them, because they never accepted me as one of them. I will kill them and make them suffer, just as they made me suffer. Righteously so”*.

October 1, 2015. **Chris Harper-Mercer** (26) kills nine people in Oregon and injures eight others, before shooting himself. He leaves a personal manifesto in which he talks about his interest in the massacres, including that of Isla Vista, and it is believed he posted threatening messages towards a Pacific Northwest college, on an online platform full of Incel content, a few hours before the massacre.

December 7, 2017. **William Atchison** (21) kills two people in New Mexico before committing suicide in a shooting at Aztec High School. He had often used the pseudonym “Elliot Rodger” on many social platforms, praising the latter as “supreme gentleman”.

February 14, 2018. **Nikolas Cruz** (19) kills seventeen people and injures as many in a shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School, Florida, before being arrested.

Shortly before the massacre Cruz posted the following comment online: “Elliot Rodger will never be forgotten.”

April 23, 2018. **Alek Minassian** (25), a Canadian citizen of Armenian descent, kills ten people and injures fourteen more by running them over with a van in Toronto, Canada, before being arrested. In almost three hours of interrogation, Minassian talks about being a virgin, of belonging to the online culture of Incels, of having used the van as a weapon and that his hope was to become an inspiration for other massacres. When asked how he felt about killing ten people, he replied, *“I feel I have accomplished a mission.”*

In the video of the interrogation, its full version available online¹¹, Minassian also talks about the end of the massacre: *“Someone’s drink spread on my windshield, and I was afraid that I would crash with the van”*; for this reason he stops and gets out of the vehicle. He then tries to provoke the policeman who has him under fire by pretending to have a gun, in order to die at the hands of the police (so-called “suicide by cop”; Lindsay & Lester, 2004), but he does not achieve his goal.

November 2, 2018. **Scott Beierle** (40) kills two women and injures five other people, before committing suicide, in a shooting at the Hot Yoga Studio (Florida). For years he had posted numerous videos on Youtube proclaiming his hatred towards women, often referring to Elliot Rodger.

June 17, 2019. **Bryan Isaack Clyde** (27), is fatally injured by the police before he can enter the Dallas Courthouse, in Texas, after posting about his plan of a massacre at the building on social media. He wore 150 bullets. Connected to his online account were various Incel, misogynist, far-right, transphobic contents.

Considerations

From a criminological point of view, we certainly find ourselves in front of subjects that can be classified in the category of authors of mass murder, that is, subjects that – according to the reference literature – determine at least three victims (Dietz, 1986; Turvey, 2008). In our opinion, however, this definition could be limiting if the intentionality of the author is considered: the number of victims may be even lower if this is caused by reasons that are independent from the murderer’s will, who for example, promptly stopped by the authorities, actually intended to continue killing (Merzagora, Pennati & Travaini, 2015). In literature, the statistically most recurrent profile for mass murderers partially coincides with that of Incels: our sample consists exclusively of males (Gray, Hempel, Meloy, Mohandie & Shiva, 2001; Turvey, 2008) which,

11 Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VyHgtSy41VM>

in most cases, act alone and in public places such as offices, schools or churches. Other common aspects of mass murderers and Incels concern the carelessness about their capture or survival and the motive underlying the gesture consisting in revenge and / or compensation (Hickey, 1991).

In front of similar behaviors, recognizable in the videos, writings and posts left by the authors of the massacres, it appears natural to wonder whether these contents are the expression of a psychopathological disorder, and if so, in what terms this disorder influenced the subjects' action.

As is often the case with mass murderers, Incels as well often decide to take their own life during the violent action or that they lose it because of a gunfight with the police. Therefore, there is no possibility of carrying out any expert assessment.

In the massacre cases previously discussed, two Incels survived because they were arrested. For Alek Minassian, as his defense attorney Boris Bytensky¹² told us, the judge ordered a psychiatric assessment, which is still under execution. As for the other case, Nikolas Cruz, we did not get any response from the defense attorney we contacted.

Literature has already dealt with the presence of pathology as the genesis of these type of crimes: a profile featuring character traits attributable to aspects of anger, persecutory experiences and injustice suffered, resulting in a desire for revenge (Declercq & Audenaert, 2011; Knoll, 2012). Furthermore, the narcissistic personological features of these subjects which are easily recognizable in the rich documentation, on video, paper or on the web left by the authors of the massacres, do not seem negligible. In accordance with what has just been specified, in fact, clinical narcissistic peculiarities emerge from these testimonies, resulting from a life full of abuses and lack of recognition of one's *grandeur*. Before dying, Elliot Rodger wrote his autobiography, which later became a manifesto for the Incels community (137 pages), just as thirty-two-year-old Norwegian Anders Breivik did before him (1518 pages).

An additional feature of Incels, which probably differentiates them from mass murderers and brings them closer to terrorists, is the presence of an ideology that underlies their violent actions, as emerges from their claims. And precisely by analyzing these claims available on the web, worrying topics emerge, such as – for example – that of a biological determinism intended as a “genetic” disadvantage that predisposes one to failure when courting a specific partner. The aspect of freeing oneself of responsibility with respect to failure and change is immediately evident, hence the conception that violence and the criminal acts are inevitable, the only viable ways. This attitude shared by the Incel community recalls, criminologically speaking, a neutralization technique

known as “moral justification” (Bandura, 1999), a strong system of moral defusing which justifies the act. Another concept used in Incel claims concerns hypergamy (the act or practice of a person marrying a spouse of a higher caste or social status¹³), an interpretative key of deterministic appeal where the relief from responsibility is evident.

This inevitably negative fate is a formidable glue for those who identify themselves as Incels, and the role played by social networks becomes decisive. Firstly, the aforementioned echo chamber effect seems interesting: social platforms are transformed into a sounding board that amplifies the perception of a deficient self which is even more frustrated by sharing the impossibility of success and change. The role of social networks as activators of emulation processes is also of criminological interest. For example, in the context of unorganized terrorism, as it happened in the “Christchurch attack” massacre in New Zealand, in which the author, Brenton Tarrant, specifically refers to historical conflicts of the past and praises Luca Traini, Italian citizen sadly known as the author of the so-called “Macerata attack”¹⁴ of 2018.

Moreover, social media play a fundamental role in the delicate phase of persuasion and recruitment – as happens in the world of more traditional terrorism – that is preparatory for the criminal act. In this sense, the contribution provided by Verza (2019) about the Incel community and the use of the internet is interesting: “*Contrary to what one might think, (...), the particular, eminently online essence of these groups (...) is not a factor which eases the problematic: on the contrary. Their online nature, in fact, promotes contact, within them, only between subjects that are already ideologically self-selected to adhere to the specific problems and ideas treated therein. In turn, however, this exclusion of dialectic and comparison with external and discordant points of view favors the production of even more intransigent, sclerotic, and polarized visions, which may in fact lead to radicalization.*”

That being said, we believe that a comparison between authors of Incels massacres and school shootings needs to be done, given that three Incels attacks out of ten took place in educational institutions. Leaving aside statistical considerations, since the small number of cases, it's important to acknowledge that almost half of the Incels attacks are, in fact, school shootings. We won't deepen this last complex topic (this is not the right place), but after reviewing some literature about it (Gerard, Whitfield, Porter & Browne, 2016; Harding, Fox & Mehta, 2002; Flannery, Modzeleski & Kretschmar, 2013), we found out that Incels Rodger, Cruz and Atchison are very similar to school shooters in terms of personality traits and *modus operandi*. White young men, with no criminal record, never showing aggressiveness, often bullied, isolated from the peer group, suffering from mental disorders of various forms and severeness. Moreover, the most recent school

12 The authors contacted lawyer Bytensky directly via email regarding the matter. The defense attorney's name was readily available from American online news. We thank the lawyer for the kind availability shown.

13 Definition from the Treccani dictionary, available at: <http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/ipergamia/>.

14 News available at: https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2018/02/03/news/macerata_sparatoria-187934230/.

shootings share another thing with Incel community: social platforms used as a sounding board that amplifies killers' discomfort and narcissism.

In conclusion, the concern raised by a thus described picture goes without saying: the number of attacks and that of the victims is growing rapidly. Hence the need to imagine actions that are not only repressive but also preventive. Starting from the assumption that the genesis of these actions is not exclusively ascribable to an underlying ideology, but that it results from a psycho-emotional discomfort and therefore, in a preventive perspective, the viable way would be to intercept these signals of discomfort before they reach a dangerous radicalization. Just as for the preventive strategies implemented towards subjects who were approaching (or had already approached) extreme Islamism, in these cases as well, a network in which psycho-social services operate in collaboration with schools, communities, working environments, should be imagined. The monitoring role carried out by the network itself is especially important, as well as the preventive function played by the sharing and diffusion of the damage caused by the Incel phenomenon, both for the victims and for the authors.

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