

# Why mental health and neurodivergence should not be used to explain incel violence

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In recent years, incidents of violence by "involuntary celibates" (incels) have raised questions about the risks and worldview of those who espouse incel beliefs. In 2022, a Canadian Parliament standing

committee explored the [connections of incel violence to threats of extremism](#).

Some [recent studies](#) have adopted a public health framing, identifying incels as [vulnerable people](#) in need of [mental health](#) and social support. Indeed, mental health support is crucial to provide help to incels. However, mental health and neurodivergence should not be characterized as drivers of incel violence. Such interpretations can stigmatize neurodivergence and also minimize incels' accountability for acts of violence.

Are incels vulnerable individuals demonstrative of a [public health crisis](#)? Or a collective movement that poses a threat of gender-based violence and terrorism?

## Who are incels?

Incels are individuals who ascribe their [lack of sexual intimacy](#) with women as a form of undue oppression. They form a misogynistic community largely comprised of men, who are angered by the denial of their "right" to sex with women. These beliefs are channeled into the promotion of violence against women.

In Canada, two major incidents of violence, which have drawn attention to the incel movement, occurred in recent years.

In 2020, a 17-year-old [fatally stabbed a woman](#) at a massage parlor in Toronto, in an incident which was ruled in 2023 as the [first-incel related act of terrorism](#) in Canada.

In the 2018 Toronto van attack, Alek Minassian [killed 10 people and another died more than three years later](#). He originally told police he was inspired by incels, but his [trial later heard different accounts of his](#)

[motivations](#).

In his court case, [Minassian's lawyers](#) argued that his autism spectrum disorder diagnosis prevented him from making rational decisions and realizing his actions were morally wrong. This use of autism as an argument to evade criminal responsibility [enraged autism advocacy groups](#) and ultimately failed in court.

## **Mental health, neurodivergence and gender-based violence**

The [public debate](#) and interest in incels is connected to broader discussions on mental health and its [relation to gender-based violence and organized ideological violence](#).

Recently, a [study from the United Kingdom](#) evaluated how harm can be predicted among incel populations, exploring the role of mental health, autism, ideology and social networks.

The report presents the largest survey of self-identified incels to date, including 561 individuals who are residents of the U.K. or United States and over the age of 18. It found that more than a third of participants met the criteria for moderate depression (39%) and anxiety (43%), along with high levels of loneliness and anger. Furthermore, the report found 30% of surveyed incels met clinical requirements for referrals for autism assessment, but not explicitly a diagnosis.

While the report warns against drawing causality between autism and terrorism, a focus on this finding could contribute to a stigmatizing claim that incels have a higher rate and likelihood of being diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder.

Some [news media](#) have cited the report, emphasizing that [incels are 30 times more likely to be autistic](#) than the general population. Although the original report offers rich data on incel populations, its findings may be misused to reinforce harmful narratives against people with autism. This may lead to stigmatizing and false claims that autistic people are predisposed to violence, radicalization or hateful ideologies due to their diagnosis.

Many people with autism see it as an integral and [positive part of their identities, rather than an illness to be cured](#). Casting autism as a mental disorder that leads to violence reinforces ableist narratives about autistic individuals as more likely to commit crimes when they are generally [more likely to be victims than perpetrators of crime](#).

## **A balancing act**

How can we balance sympathy towards individuals battling mental health challenges while also holding violent actors accountable?

Mental health resources for individuals in incel spaces are crucial to prevent violence. [One study](#) indicated that social isolation can exacerbate negative feelings that lead individuals to join incel communities seeking a sense of belonging.

The U.K. study rightly concludes that interventions addressing the incel community's mental health requires an effective harm reduction strategy. However, drivers of poor mental health must be evaluated beyond individual-level factors such as [autism](#) or mental health diagnoses.

We must also examine systemic factors for adverse mental health among those driven to join the incel community, [such as the role of technology and the internet in facilitating radicalization](#) and lack of [social support](#) programs for people in vulnerable situations.

The U.K. report argues "[incels need mental health support rather than a counter-terrorism intervention](#)." While mental health support is crucial, solely adopting a public health approach in replacement of a comprehensive public safety and counter-terrorism perspective can be reductive.

It can characterize incels as [lone wolves](#) in a way that ignores the organized nature of the incel community in promoting violence. Further, it dismisses ongoing efforts to understand [how gendered forms of violence can underpin radical ideology classified as extremism or terrorism](#). Public health initiatives and counter-terrorism should not be seen as trade-offs, but work hand-in-hand to identify threats of gendered ideological extremism and work towards mental health approaches to de-radicalization.

Addressing incel violence requires a more fluid and collaborative understanding of public health and counter-terrorism approaches to dealing with the issue. Greater attention must be paid to balancing accountability for [violence](#) and sympathy towards people who need mental health support.

If you are experiencing challenges with your mental health and well-being, we encourage you to seek help and resources. You may refer to [this repository](#) of mental health services around the world.

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