

» dist[ex] Policy Paper «

No. 5 | March 2026

From Self-Hatred to Hate against Women

Incels and Their Relevance for Disengagement and Exit Work

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dist[ex]

Development of a Network for
Disengagement and Exit Work



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» Abstract

This paper analyses the difficulty of clearly assigning the incel scene to a specific category of extremism. It shows how this misogynistic online subculture's anti-feminist stance provides a central bridging narrative, creating a common ideological link between different extremist currents.

Against this backdrop, the paper highlights the importance of disengagement and exit work that is not specifically directed at any one category of extremism and so is able to react appropriately to new developments that resist easy classification. It calls for an expansion of low-barrier support services and the development of specific resources for incels, those in their social environment and relevant professionals. In conclusion, it identifies action areas for tertiary prevention and the structural challenges that policymakers and wider society must overcome.



» Incels as a social phenomenon and their implications for security policy

Since the release of the Netflix series *Adolescence*, the subject of incels has received a lot more attention in public debates, media coverage and scholarly analysis. The series shows that hegemonic norms of masculinity that legitimise violence are not just a threat to women and queer people, but also to the men who have internalised these attitudes. This is especially evident in the incel subculture. In its most radical form, it serves as a nexus between various extremist currents and in some countries, such as Canada, it is classified as terrorism (Kaiser 2020: 92). Incels are also at higher risk of suicide (Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) 2021). For these reasons, more attention and resources need to be dedicated to this online subculture within tertiary prevention work.

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» Ideological foundations of the incel scene and its place in the manosphere

Incels are men who describe themselves as 'involuntarily celibate'. They blame feminism for the fact that they do not have any romantic or sexual relationships, claiming it has upset a 'natural' gender order. According to their theory, women preferentially select partners from only a small circle of highly attractive and economically successful men, known as 'chads' or 'alphas'. The majority of men, it is claimed, are systematically excluded from the sex and relationship market. Incels regard this exclusion as unfair, because they believe they have a natural entitlement to a female partner. They see women's independence and freedom of choice as the main cause of their predicament (Horthen and Orth 2022). Incel ideology is supported by its own vocabulary, which includes highly derogatory and disparaging terms for women. Because of the sometimes peculiar and vulgar terminology that incels use and their crude simplifications of reality, this online subculture is often dismissed as 'a tiny fringe group of online weirdos', despite being 'the most violent corner of the so-called manosphere' (Bates 2020: ch. 1). The manosphere is a digital landscape of blogs, forums, videos and social media channels in which various male-centric groups exchange views and ideas. Through the manosphere, traditional and largely anti-feminist ideas about gender are disseminated. The spectrum extends all the way to emphatically misogynistic currents that justify violence against women as a necessary reaction to a supposed oppression of



men. Overall, the manosphere serves to collect together narratives that present men as victims of social trends and ascribe excessive power to women (ibid.: ch. 1).

» The pill metaphor as the manosphere's radicalisation logic

In this online world, the pill metaphor plays a key role as an organising narrative that categorises different attitudes and levels of knowledge. It's based on a scene from *The Matrix*, in which a character must choose between two perceptions of reality.



“Blackpilled” men believe they are condemned to permanent failure, for which they blame progressive social changes.



A commonly observed pattern of radicalisation goes from blue pill to red pill to black pill ideology: in the manosphere, the 'blue pill' refers disparagingly to the belief that a combination of good personality, hard work and a fundamentally fair society will lead to (romantic) success. 'Bluepilled' men have, incels claim, allowed themselves to be duped by society and

feminism. The red pill, by contrast, represents a supposed awakening from this delusion, in which men come to recognise that success in dating women is entirely down to appearance, genetic traits and financial status. According to this logic, men can only improve their situation by altering their appearance, for instance by cosmetic surgery. This view is especially prevalent in the 'looksmaxxing' scene¹ and among 'pick-up artists' in the manosphere.² The black pill, finally, symbolises the fatalistic view that no improvement is possible and that certain men will inevitably live their lives as unloved, untouched losers due to their supposed genetic inferiority. 'Blackpilled' men believe they are condemned to permanent failure, for which they blame progressive social changes. In the incel scene, there is some discussion about whether only those who have this hopeless perspective on the world are true incels, by contrast with red pillers whose outlook on life is too optimistic for them to qualify (Horthen and Orth 2022: 356).

» Legitimising violence, the terrorism debate and links to extremist views

In online incel forums, this ideology leads to extreme misogyny and hate speech, sometimes extending into fantasies of rape and murder. Perpetrators of violent or murderous acts who

1 Looksmaxxing is a trend, predominantly on social media, of trying to optimise your appearance and increase your perceived attractiveness. It is especially popular among boys and young men. The recommendations shared in online looksmaxxing communities range from daily grooming routines to risky practices such as bone smashing, where people deliberately injure themselves to achieve more 'chiselled' facial features. Another concern is that many looksmaxxing influencers profit financially off users' insecurities, for example by selling nutritional supplements, self-improvement courses or cosmetic treatments (Klicksafe 2025).

2 Pick-up artists claim they can teach shy men methods for picking up women and getting sex. In this context, they often disseminate a sexist and misogynistic worldview in which women are degradingly reduced to objects of desire. They also propagate a toxic ideal of masculinity based on dominance, aggressive behaviour and emotional manipulation (Kaiser 2020: 36 ff).



explicitly made reference to incel ideology or were involved in the incel community are glorified, and users encouraged to emulate them. There are a number of internationally famous killers whose names come up especially often, including a mass murderer from the US who killed six people and then himself, another from Canada and a far-right Norwegian terrorist who murdered 77 people, most of them teenagers. In the incel scene, these men are venerated as heroes or even saints. They inspired the Halle shooter in 2019, who during the attack listened to music glorifying the Canadian murderer. As well as far-right perpetrators, forum users can also be observed celebrating Islamist figures and IS members. The men venerated as 'heroes' are 'serial killers, jihadists, neo-Nazis, spree murderers' (Kracher 2020: 185). In the forums, expressions of sympathy for IS and their use of sexual violence as a weapon coexist alongside praise for the aforementioned far-right Christian fundamentalist terrorist from Norway. Analysing incel forums reveals the potent role played by anti-feminism and misogyny as a bridging narrative between different currents of extremism. The fight against progressive social developments, especially the hated feminism, is the unifying factor (ibid.: 185 ff). These misogynistic worldviews are often underpinned by seething racism as well as another bridge narrative: the antisemitic conspiracy theory that feminist accomplishments are part of a global Jewish agenda (Becksmann 2021: 96–97).

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Experts have discussed whether the incel scene should be categorised as an extremist or even terrorist movement in its own right. The diverging opinions on this point are often due to the lack of a common definition of terrorism (Kaiser 2020: 79 ff). In the US, security services in some cases already monitor the incel subculture as a domestic terror movement. In Canada, in the first ruling of its kind, the murder of a young woman was deemed to be a terrorist act linked to incel ideology (Public Prosecution Service of Canada 2025). In Germany, offences linked to incel ideology are recorded in police crime statistics as 'misogynist' hate crimes, a subcategory of 'politically motivated crimes', but not as a separate phenomenon. Nor is the incel scene specifically monitored by the German domestic intelligence services (Deutscher Bundestag 2022), though the Berlin Criminal Investigation Division (LKA) is currently conducting a case study on it as part of an interdisciplinary research project (RadiGaME n.d.).

» **Diffusion into the mainstream and relevance to youth and prevention work**

As well as the activities of self-professed incels in their online communities, it is important to highlight the movement's influence on wider social debates and on young people's digital worlds, since key elements of its ideology have spread far beyond explicit incel forums. The vocabulary described earlier often makes use of sarcasm, dark humour and clichéd images, which lend themselves to being adapted to memes and other easily digestible formats. For example, the pill metaphor explained earlier can often be found on Instagram, TikTok or YouTube channels that are not part of the manosphere or incel scene. It is mostly used humorously on these channels, though this still serves to make



the underlying ideas seem more innocuous. In this way, the incel scene's codes and language can infiltrate deep into the mainstream and become embedded in youth-culture contexts (Jugendschutz.net 2025).

» Incels as a relevant area of action for disengagement and exit work

This section summarises key findings on the incel scene that reveal a need for specific support as well as the structural gaps that currently exist. These points mark the main action areas for prevention, disengagement and exit work.

- **Strong potential for radicalisation:** Many men end up in incel forums due to extreme loneliness, heavy emotional burdens and low self-esteem. They are looking for a space where they can share their frustrations and find people who understand them. But they often encounter a toxic environment that systematically reinforces self-hatred, misogyny and fatalistic beliefs. Individual experiences of crisis are channelled into notions of collective enemies and ideological explanatory schemas. Incel ideology takes root especially quickly in those who lack social ties outside these online spaces (Kracher 2020: 207 ff). Social media platforms' algorithmic recommendation systems can further bolster these dynamics. For example, users of the r/IncelExit subreddit report that they often came into contact with incel content because they were looking for advice, but were increasingly subjected to radicalising content that fuelled a growing hopelessness and a sense of having no prospects for the future.³
- **Barriers to disengagement:** The scholarly literature on the incel scene goes into great detail about the grave psychological consequences the incel worldview, especially the aforementioned black pill ideology, can have for its adherents. One point that is repeatedly emphasised is how difficult it is for people to distance themselves from the scene unaided, as for many users it has become the core of their social life: 'Just like a sect or abusive relationship, you can't simply leave incel forums. Rather, you've entered a whirlpool that sucks you ever deeper in' (Kracher 2020: 213). This highlights the importance of establishing disengagement and exit services tailored specifically to this target group.
- **Suicidality:** The fatalistic black pill ideology tells the men who subscribe to it that there is no way out of their seemingly hopeless situation. In incel forums, which are often sought out by men looking for support, it is not uncommon for suicide to be presented as the only solution. Men who express suicidal thoughts often have them reinforced rather than receiving help.
- **Resistance to categorisation:** Although the incel scene and much of the manosphere have significant overlaps with far- or extreme-right milieus, they resist being unambiguously assigned to that category. Research shows that some incels take a positive view of Islamist or jihadist violence. Generally speaking, there is no shared political agenda. The main unifying element is anti-feminism as a central bridging narrative. In view of this, incel ideology can be regarded as a discrete current of misogyny.

³ See for instance this discussion thread on Reddit: https://www.reddit.com/r/IncelExit/comments/1owlpi1/the_incel_mindset_is_really_starting_to_get_to_me/ (accessed 26 November 2025).



- **Lack of services:** Due to the difficulty of classifying the incel scene, few dedicated disengagement and exit services currently exist for incels despite the great need for them. This is partly attributable to the fact that in Germany, it has until now been standard practice to allocate funding based around specific categories of extremism, which disengagement and exit work projects targeted at incels don't fit into. One helpful measure would be to provide low-barrier online resources for incels and those in their social environment. These resources should take account of suicidality, psychological issues such as depression and loneliness as a radicalisation factor and, if necessary, be offered in conjunction with additional therapeutic services.
- **Training for therapists:** In addition, training resources should be developed for practising psychotherapists so that they can learn about incel ideologies, some of the movement's central codes (such as the pill metaphor) and the communication dynamics in forums and image boards, which will allow them to provide appropriate professional support to those affected.
- **Training for educational professionals:** Many educational professionals lack knowledge about the realities of current digital subcultures. Although the incel phenomenon isn't specific to young people, incels do create anti-feminist and misogynist narratives that appear in young people's digital worlds. Training should therefore address the normalisation of incel language and attitudes, with providers working with professionals to identify possible courses of action open to them.
- **Opportunities for disengagement and exit work by civil society organisations:** Since there are often considerable barriers to people disengaging from the incel scene by themselves, there is clear potential for disengagement and exit services in digital spaces. Observations have shown that those affected often mention their social needs, biographical crises and experiences of stress of their own accord, and explicitly articulate a need for support. This suggests the target group will be willing to engage if they are actively addressed with appropriate, low-barrier support services.
- **Support for those affected by digital violence:** As well as services aimed directly at people in the incel scene (which serve to prevent those people from committing criminal offences and so are crucial to protecting their potential victims), funding is also needed for projects that provide tailored, low-barrier support and advice for people affected by digital violence and hate crimes linked to the incel movement, ensuring their safety and alleviating psychological and social burdens.
- **Raising public awareness:** Nuanced public awareness of the problem is needed. On the one hand, that includes educating people about the real possibility of violence and radicalisation posed by incel subculture and ensuring security services place greater emphasis on it. But it is also necessary, without downplaying hate or violence, to draw attention to the underlying problems, in particular loneliness, possible mental illnesses and toxic ideals of masculinity.



» Conclusion

The incel scene is a discrete ideological phenomenon that eludes simple classification as a form of extremism, yet poses risks to society and public safety. Anti-feminism functions as a central bridging narrative that provides a point of connection to various extremist ideologies and facilitates the legitimization of violence, digital hate crime and self-harming behaviour. At the same time, there are clear opportunities for disengagement and exit work, as those affected often articulate their need for support and help dealing with crises of their own accord, which provides entry points for low-barrier advice and support services. These should take account of both security-related issues and social/psychological causes and concerns.

Because its focus is not limited to a specific form of extremism, **dist[ex] – Development of a Network for Disengagement and Exit Work** offers a suitable framework for responding to these challenges. In particular, being able to bring together expertise on different extremist currents and develop integrated approaches will empower practitioners in the field to respond flexibly to new phenomena such as the incel scene that are currently not being adequately addressed. In this way, dist[ex] can make a key contribution to developing disengagement and exit work, following a connected, learning-based approach that is fit for the challenges of the future.



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dist[ex] - Development of a Network for Disengagement and Exit Work is a cooperation network established in 2025, dedicated to strengthening and fostering collaboration among disengagement and exit work practitioners across Germany. Within dist[ex] five civil society organisations, namely BAG Ausstieg zum Einstieg e.V., Grüner Vogel e.V., Interdisciplinary Centre for the Prevention of Radicalisation and the Promotion of Democracy (IZRD), Legato/Vereinigung Pestalozzi gGmbH and Violence Prevention Network gGmbH collaborate with fellow civil society organisations, projects and experts in exit and disengagement work from all over Germany, to establish a network that fosters professional development and exchange, expands cooperation with relevant stakeholders in established structures and acts as a civil society advocacy group. dist[ex] focuses on sustainability, structural connections, and nationwide impact. Violence Prevention Network gGmbH is responsible for coordinating the cooperation network.



dist[ex] is funded by the Federal Ministry for Education, Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth as part of the federal program "Live Democracy!"

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