Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice

Abstract | Online communities of 'incels' (involuntary celibates) have become synonymous with the promotion of misogyny and violence against women, particularly in light of recent violent incidents connected to them. Understanding how men stop engaging with these online communities is therefore important for broader violence prevention efforts.

This study used a qualitative survey of self-identified former incels to determine motivations for disengagement, strategies to facilitate disengagement, and whether and how their attitudes towards violence against women changed with disengagement.

Findings indicate that, while motivations to disengage varied, the strongest was disillusionment. This motivation in particular often led to improved attitudes towards women upon disengagement.

Disengagement from online misogynistic incel communities and its implications for attitudes to gendered violence

Laura Doherty, Christopher Dowling and Meg Dickens

The term 'incel'—a portmanteau of the words 'involuntary' and 'celibate'—describes someone who is unable to establish a romantic or sexual relationship despite wanting to (Hintz & Baker 2021). People of any gender and sexual orientation may identify as incels, and not all incels hold misogynistic attitudes (Czerwinsky 2024). However, in the last 10 years, the term has become associated with online communities of incel-identifying heterosexual men who blame their celibacy on their perceived unfair and hostile treatment by women and society (Abdulla 2022; Sugiura 2021; Van Brunt & Taylor 2020). These online communities sit within the broader 'manosphere', a loose online network of communities known for promoting misogyny and anti-feminist attitudes in backlash to the purported oppression of men in modern society (Abdulla 2022).

Concerns have been raised regarding the role of the manosphere, particularly the misogynistic incel communities within it, in legitimising and promoting violence (Aiolfi et al. 2024; DeCook & Kelly 2022; Gosse, Halpin & Maguire 2025; O'Donnell & Shor 2018; O'Malley, Holt & Holt 2020). Prior research has identified aggrieved entitlement (a desire to seek revenge in response to a perceived loss of masculinity; Kimmel 2013) as a particularly salient motivation for violence among this cohort (Hoffman, Ware & Shapiro 2020; Thorburn 2023; Thorburn, Powell & Chambers 2023). While most men who identify as incels do not pose a direct physical threat to others (Williams et al. 2021), there has been an international rise in violent incidents connected to ideas propagated within some online incel communities (Baele, Brace & Coan 2021; Latimore & Coyne 2023). This has led to a greater focus on these communities in Australia by both national security organisations (eg Burgess 2024), and those involved in efforts to reduce violence against women (eg eSafety Commissioner 2024).

Given the potential for violence stemming from these online communities, understanding how men stop engaging with them is crucial to preventing violence (eg Hoffman, Ware & Shapiro 2020; Latimore & Coyne 2023). To date, there has been limited research into disengagement from online misogynistic incel communities. It is therefore helpful to draw upon literature on disengagement from radicalised, violent or deviant groups more broadly, while acknowledging the differences between these groups and online communities of incels (see Smith, Butler-Warke & Stevens 2025; Sugiura 2021). In this context, disengagement refers to behavioural change resulting in people no longer participating in or identifying with these groups (Fink & Hearne 2008). Early models of disengagement from radicalised social groups, religious groups, cults, gangs and criminal organisations identified disillusionment as central to this process (eg Bjørgo 1997). Disillusionment refers to the incongruence between expectations of participating in a group and the realities of their subsequent experience, and it may occur gradually or as a singular event (eg Horgan et al. 2017).

The few studies which have examined disengagement from online incel communities have primarily used data from public forums of incels (eg Burns & Boislard 2024; Gheorghe & Clement 2025; Hintz & Baker 2021; Osuna 2024) or interviews with men who currently identify, or formerly identified, as incels (eg Adams & Smith 2025; Smith, Butler-Warke & Stevens 2025). This literature highlights a number of factors that can motivate men to disengage, including:

- relational and social triggers, including dating efforts (Burns & Boislard 2024), positive interactions with women (Osuna 2024), sexual relationships and realisations of sexual and/or gender identity (Hintz & Baker 2021);

- cognitive and ideological shifts, including growing awareness of the harm caused by online incel communities, and fatigue with their negativity, self-criticism and hopelessness (Adams & Smith 2025; Burns & Boislard 2024; Hintz & Baker 2021; Osuna 2024; Smith, Butler-Warke & Stevens 2025); and

- changes in life circumstances, including entering college or moving away from home (Hintz & Baker 2021; Smith, Butler-Warke & Stevens 2025) or obtaining employment (Smith, Butler-Warke & Stevens 2025).

The research further identifies strategies that men may use to disengage from online incel communities, including self-improvement (eg education, employment and hobbies), engagement with prosocial peers and trying to limit access to online incel content (Adams & Smith 2025; Burns & Boislard 2024; Gheorghe & Clement 2025).

The current study builds upon this work by surveying men who were formerly engaged with online communities of incels in which misogynistic ideas were normalised or promoted and examining how their disengagement affected their attitudes towards violence against women. This study aimed to answer the following research questions:

- Why do men decide to disengage from online misogynistic incel communities?
- How do men disengage from online misogynistic incel communities?
- How do men's attitudes towards violence against women change with disengagement from online misogynistic incel communities?

Method

Data collection

The findings of this study are drawn from an anonymous online survey of adult men who formerly engaged with online incel communities that emphasised ideas which were hostile to women, other men and society in general, and/or which promoted extreme self-hatred and a sense of hopelessness regarding their involuntary celibacy. Noting the need for researchers to be specific about the subpopulation of incels to which they are referring (Czerwinsky 2024), this paper refers to online misogynistic incel communities throughout. The survey ran from March to October 2024 and was open to men aged 18 years and over residing in Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada. The survey was advertised on Reddit. No posts were made on specific forums. Rather, paid advertisements were targeted towards users who engaged in relevant forums (eg related to dating, life advice and self-improvement). Survey questions focused on:

- respondent demographics;
- engagement with online misogynistic incel (and adjacent) communities;
- disengagement from online misogynistic incel (and adjacent) communities;
- the extent to which men accessed support to disengage; and
- attitudes towards women.

There were 53 respondents to the survey. Respondents were excluded from analysis if they did not fit the sampling frame (ie never identified as incels or currently identified as incels; n=4) or provided no answers or nonsensical answers to the questions (n=6). The final sample was 43.

Sample

The sample is described in Table 1. Consistent with previous research (eg Moskalenko et al. 2022; Speckhard & Ellenberg 2022; Whittaker, Costello & Thomas 2024), there was a high level of self-identified disability (42%, n=18) and neurodiversity (70%, n=30) among this sample. It is important to emphasise that the high prevalence of disability and neurodiversity does not mean there is a causal relationship between these factors and subscribing to the incel ideology or other radicalised ideologies (see, for example, Wijekoon et al. 2024).

Respondents most commonly became interested in online misogynistic incel communities while they were 15–17 years old (41%, *n*=17; Figure 1). Respondents engaged with these communities for an average of four years and seven months (Table 2). While all respondents indicated consuming content from these communities, half (51%, *n*=22) had also contributed original content and two (5%) had attended an in-person meeting.

Table 1: Sample demographics (*n*=43)		
	n	%
Country of residence		
Australia	11	26
New Zealand	18	42
United Kingdom	5	12
United States	3	7
Canada	6	14
Remoteness[a]		
City	28	65
Town	7	16
Rural or remote area	7	16
Employment[b]		
Employed on a full-time, part-time or casual basis	20	47
Unemployed	8	19
Full-time student	8	19
Not working for another reason	3	7
Highest level of educational attainment[c]		
Postgraduate	9	21
Undergraduate	16	37
High school	13	30
Did not complete high school	2	5
Age group		
18–24	11	26
25–34	19	44
35–44	8	19
45 or over	5	12
Culturally and/or linguistically diverse[a,d]	**7**	**16**
Indigenous[a,e]	**4**	**9**
Disability[f]	**18**	**42**
Neurodiversity	**30**	**70**
Total	**43**	**–**

a: Denominator includes one respondent who did not provide this information

b: Denominator includes four respondents who responded with 'other'

c: Denominator includes three respondents who responded with 'other'

d: Includes those who were born in a non-English-speaking country, or identified with a non-English-speaking cultural background

e: Includes those who identified as Indigenous, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, or Māori

f: Disability was defined as 'a disability or health condition that has lasted, or is likely to last, 6 months or longer'

Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding

Source: AIC Disengaging from Misogynistic Online Communities Survey 2024 [computer file]

Figure 1: Participants by age in years at first engagement with online misogynistic incel communities (*n*=41)
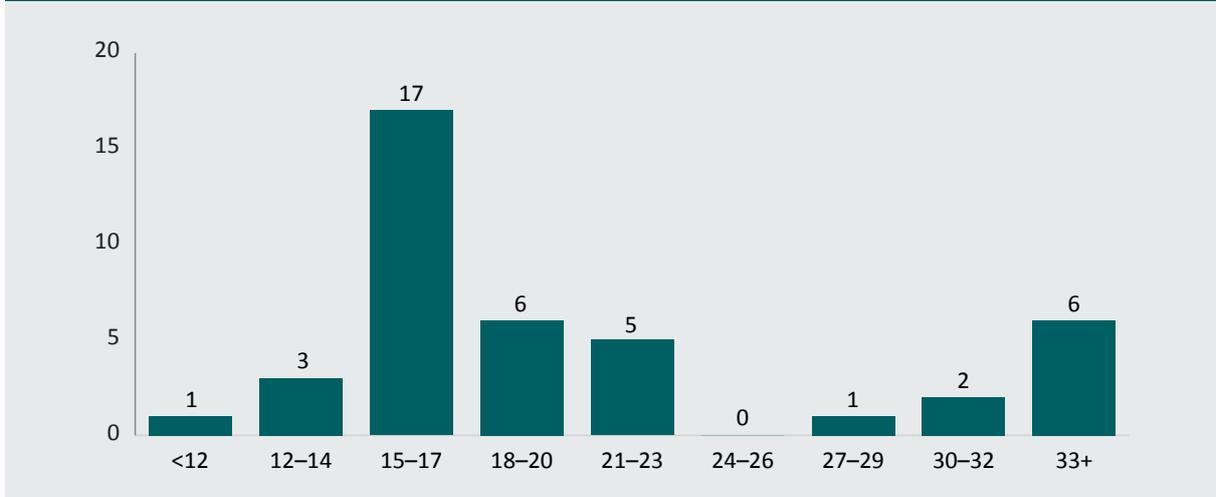
Note: Excludes 2 respondents who did not provide this information

Source: AIC Disengaging from Misogynistic Online Communities Survey 2024 [computer file]

Table 2: Engagement with online misogynistic incel communities (*n*=43)

	n	%
Nature of engagement[a,b]		
Consumed content	41	95
Contributed original content	22	51
Attended an in-person meet-up	2	5
Length of engagement (mean, years)		4.62
Total	**43**	–

a: Denominator includes two respondents who did not provide this information

b: Categories are not mutually exclusive

Source: AIC Disengaging from Misogynistic Online Communities Survey 2024 [computer file]

Analysis

This study involved the thematic analysis of free text survey responses, informed by Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines. Information was extracted from survey responses and inductively coded by the first author. Codes were validated with the second author. The research team then collated codes into larger themes based on recurring concepts. This inductive approach to analysis allowed for flexibility during the coding process, which is suitable when addressing exploratory aims (Braun & Clarke 2006). Analysis was undertaken using MAXQDA software.

Limitations

It is possible that men who were never fully embedded in online misogynistic incel communities are over-represented in the study sample for two reasons. First, survey respondents were recruited through Reddit. The primary Reddit forums for discussing involuntary celibacy were banned in 2017 (Solon 2017) and these forums were found to host significantly less hostility towards women and society than those outside of Reddit (Pelzer et al. 2021). Second, a number of respondents indicated that they were uncomfortable with many of the hostile, misogynistic and nihilistic ideas expressed in online misogynistic incel communities. This may indicate that these respondents were only loosely engaged (eg Andersen 2025). Further, different online incel communities demonstrate different levels of misogynistic (Ribeiro et al. 2021) and violent (Baele, Brace & Ging 2024) language, and this survey did not collect data on the forum(s) from which respondents had disengaged. For these reasons, and due to the nature of the data collection and analysis processes, care must be taken in generalising these findings to broader communities of men identifying as incels or former incels. This survey also did not collect information about the time at which respondents first became engaged with online misogynistic incel communities. This is an important limitation noting that the language used in such communities has become increasingly misogynistic and violent (eg Baele, Brace & Ging 2024; Ribeiro et al. 2021). However, respondents indicated having first been interested in the incel ideology from the early 2000s onwards. In recognition of the changing nature of online misogynistic incel communities, all quotes refer to the length of time over which respondents were engaged in these communities.

Findings

Motivations for disengaging from online misogynistic incel communities

There were four overarching motivations for disengaging from online misogynistic incel communities: growing dissatisfaction with these communities, establishing new connections outside of them, changing interests, and intimate relationships with women. Importantly, some respondents identified multiple motivations for disengaging that occurred at a similar time.

Growing dissatisfaction with online misogynistic incel communities

The primary motivation for disengagement identified by respondents was growing dissatisfaction with the communities they were engaged with. This dissatisfaction stemmed from a divide between what respondents wanted from these communities and what the communities were seen to offer. This was primarily characterised by a rejection of the violence and hostility displayed by others, both towards women specifically and towards society more broadly:

> Their views on women, they thought they were owed sex just for existing. There were some real crazy people in the forums … Their values don't align with my values … (Respondent 28, engaged for 6 months)

> The movement became more violent—once Elliot Rodger did his shooting, and people were saying it was a good thing and praising his killings I realized that this wasn't a movement I wanted any part of. (Respondent 16, engaged for 3 years)

Relatedly, growing dissatisfaction with the communities was also attributed to a rejection of attitudes that respondents deemed to be increasingly radicalised. This was particularly true of respondents who sought out these forums as a source of support:

> The general turn towards the us vs the rest of the world and the radicalisation of something that really started as a group for generally lonely people struggling with establishing and maintaining relationships. (Respondent 13, engaged for 7 years and 4 months)

> I first became involved because of isolation and loneliness, I felt some togetherness with others in my situation. I quickly started noticing that my views were being negatively influenced against women by the adverse opinions of the subculture, and (thankfully) snapped out of it. (Respondent 12, engaged for 6 months)

These experiences may reflect the increasingly misogynistic and violent rhetoric within online incel communities (eg Baele, Brace & Ging 2024; Ribeiro et al. 2021).

Some respondents attributed their dissatisfaction with the communities to their growing realisation that engagement was exacerbating mental illness, feelings of loneliness and related concerns. These impacts may have affected respondents themselves or other members:

> It just fuels an unhealthy loop of depression and makes it even worse when it comes to accepting your own faults. (Respondent 26, engaged for 3 months)

> None of them were getting any better, living in an echo chamber and fulfilling their own prophecy … (Respondent 7, engaged for 3 months)

Exposure to people outside of online misogynistic incel communities

Some respondents described their exposure to people outside of online misogynistic incel communities as the primary trigger for their disengagement. These people often challenged the hostile and negative attitudes respondents had developed:

> I met a friend who I would classify as a normie socially, but who still held my same interests in anime and video games. He had relationship experience and would talk about it, and although he was wronged by people he moved on and didn't internalize it. I wanted to become more like him. (Respondent 16, engaged for 3 years)

> … at 18, it clicked that all of this was really wrong. I guess it could be because I was already taking college classes before I graduated high school and saw how everybody else was not only getting along regardless of gender, but also because they were extremely polite and nice to me and [about] my disabilities. (Respondent 34, engaged for 3 years)

In some cases, respondents spoke about meeting women and subsequently establishing friendships or intimate relationships with them. These relationships challenged the stereotypes and attitudes regarding women that some respondents had internalised from online misogynistic incel communities, leading them to mentally shift responsibility for their situation from women onto themselves or other factors:

> I was exposed to the experiences of my female peers through the internet and began to understand that my loneliness was due to my own self isolation tendencies [rather] than anything to do with women. (Respondent 40, engaged for 10 years)

> I got a girlfriend as well and my mental health and self-esteem was just as bad as ever, so I realized I had false ideas about what would make me feel better (females being attracted to me, sex, etc) … In reality [women] couldn't help even if they wanted to … (Respondent 33, engaged for 5–8 years)

Changing interests

A small number of respondents spoke about simply growing bored with online misogynistic incel communities. This reflected sexual relationships and sex/gender politics becoming less of a priority in respondents' lives. In some cases, this coincided with changes in the broader political landscape which meant that they no longer felt as regularly exposed to issues related to feminism:

> No particular event occurred, I think probably I stopped caring mostly when the feminism wave became to recede because it obviously didn't work that well politically (see 2016 US election) … I just stopped caring about politics altogether … (Respondent 2, engaged for 4 years)

In other cases, respondents indicated 'aging out' of a previously intense interest in sex and relationships with women, describing it as no longer being a priority in their lives.

Sexual experiences with women

For a few respondents, the motivation to disengage from online misogynistic incel communities stemmed specifically from sexual experiences with women. These respondents did not talk about their sexual experiences challenging their views on women and sex. Indeed, one respondent identified following 'red pill advice' and getting 'jacked' as the reason he was able to start having sex (Respondent 21, unknown length of engagement). Others sought the services of sex workers simply to 'get rid of virginity/inexperience' (Respondent 36, engaged for 3 years). For these respondents, sexual experiences had a much narrower purpose, to nullify the 'incel' label they had ascribed to themselves, making online misogynistic incel communities seem no longer relevant to them.

Strategies for disengaging from online misogynistic incel communities

Respondents identified a range of strategies for disengaging from online misogynistic incel communities. These strategies centred on cutting ties, strengthening ties with those outside of these communities and in their offline lives, and increasing engagement in activities focused on self-improvement.

Separation from online misogynistic incel communities

Most respondents spoke about methods they used to reduce and end their engagement with online misogynistic incel communities. This mostly related to incel-specific content, although others also distanced themselves from adjacent content that they found reinvigorated their harmful attitudes. To facilitate long-term change, some respondents took the additional step of making it more difficult for themselves to access this content again in future.

> I deleted all of my accounts, and for those that I couldn't I changed the passwords to gibberish … (Respondent 32, engaged for 5 years)

> I honestly pretended that I dropped dead, and that someone else got my accounts because of that and closed it all down. I … deleted/deactivated all my accounts on websites that had incel activity that I participated in. (Respondent 34, engaged for 3 years)

Not all respondents had permanently ceased accessing these communities, demonstrating the often gradual nature of disengagement (see also Gheorghe & Clement 2025):

> I still [access] the sites but I no longer post from the incel perspective. (Respondent 19, engaged for 10 years)

> I am taking a 3 months break … I still read blackpill stuff (albeit less), just don't comment on it much until my 3 months are over. (Respondent 41, engaged for 2 years)

A number of respondents noted that they still came across incel and related content, even when they did not intentionally seek it. This is perhaps unsurprising given the prominence of misogynistic content online (Ribeiro et al. 2021). Here, respondents noted the importance of engaging critically with the material:

> [I] avoid red pill style articles or where I do run into them, read more critically. (Respondent 31, engaged for 6 years)

Critical engagement with online content is a core component of media literacy (Hobbs & Jensen 2009), which may improve understanding of media bias and influence (Jeong, Cho & Hwang 2012) and contribute to a reduction in violent behaviours and violence acceptance (Krahé & Busching 2015).

Relatedly, some respondents emphasised taking the additional step of challenging other people's harmful attitudes, even seeking out online spaces where these attitudes were expressed for this purpose. This was identified as aiding respondents' efforts to challenge their own harmful attitudes, and symbolically marking their disengagement:

> … I closed the discord server that was more hate filled and promoted positive outlooks in the other less severe one. (Respondent 10, engaged for 4 years)

Engagement with prosocial peers

Another strategy used to support disengagement was engaging with prosocial peers. This included putting effort into developing new social connections, engaging with religious institutions, and accessing different online communities. For some respondents, developing and investing in new social connections provided them with a space in which they could comfortably challenge incel-related ideas:

> I have integrated into friend groups of mixed genders where some of the younger men sometimes exhibit incel behaviors and the women and older men in the group help explain the errors in that line of reasoning to them. (Respondent 40, engaged for 10 years)

This was similarly true for some respondents who engaged with religion:

> Praying and going to mosque helps me find peace and feel less angry. This is very helpful because it makes me think about being better instead of feeling bad all the time. (Respondent 9, engaged for 3 years)

These connections were particularly important for respondents who felt as though they had 'lost a male support group' (Respondent 28, engaged for 6 months) while disengaging from online misogynistic incel communities.

In the online space, many respondents spoke about accessing different online content and finding 'better groups to engage with' (Respondent 5, unknown length of engagement) such as those dedicated to particular hobbies or recreational pursuits:

> I gained access to spaces to engage with my hobbies which were not associated with incel culture and … stopped lurking incel spaces. (Respondent 40, engaged for 10 years)

Focus on self-improvement

A number of respondents spoke about the importance of focusing on self-improvement to bolster disengagement. Here, respondents were particularly concerned with improving their physical or mental health, largely to feel better about themselves and address the personal insecurities that underpinned their engagement in online misogynistic incel communities in the first place:

> I started shifting the blame away from females and jealously of other males and instead focused on myself and my actions and how they affect my future … I don't want to see the downfall of the other guys but I want to improve myself so I'm less insecure … (Respondent 6, engaged for 6–7 years)

> The main thing that brought me away from it was focusing on improving myself by doing things like working out, eating better, etc. which improved my self-image and made me stop thinking about there being nothing I could do. (Respondent 11, engaged for 2 years)

To support them in their efforts to improve their physical or mental health, a number of respondents spoke about the importance of new hobbies to distract them from negative thinking:

> I think 13-40yo men are always raring for a new 'demon to slay' … For me, I've found I'm quite intuitive with physics, so am currently trying to 'slay the demon' (read: comprehend) of quantum mechanics. (Respondent 2, engaged for 4 years)

While respondents mostly reported pursuing self-improvement independently or through social or online groups, in a small number of cases self-improvement was also facilitated by respondents accessing support services, including medical professionals and psychologists:

> [I] got help from my medical team to work on social anxiety, boundaries for my own safety, and other super helpful things that made my extremely anxious brain relax, especially around girls. (Respondent 34, engaged for 3 years)

Implications of disengagement for attitudes to women

As discussed, the primary concern regarding online misogynistic incel communities is the legitimisation and promotion of violence and harmful attitudes towards women. Respondents in the current sample identified a range of implications their disengagement had for their attitudes towards violence against women.

Attitudes to women prior to disengagement

Unsurprisingly, many of the respondents in this sample held hostile or negative attitudes towards women while engaged with online misogynistic incel communities. Respondents often used derogatory and dehumanising terms such as 'foids'—a portmanteau of the words 'female' and 'humanoids' or 'androids'—to describe women and identified an overall distrust of or anger towards them. These attitudes were intertwined with respondents' feelings of being rejected by women for sex or intimacy:

> I had been taught from a young age the wealth that respect and friendship with women provided. Not just for them but myself/society. I felt a big discrepancy in how I'd been brought up and how the current dating pool behaved. (Respondent 1, engaged for 3 years)

> My feelings towards women were deeply conflicted and often negative. This negativity stemmed from personal experiences and perceived societal injustices. I felt that women held unrealistic expectations and biases towards men, particularly those who didn't fit conventional standards of attractiveness or social status. This perceived bias fostered a sense of resentment and frustration. (Respondent 15, engaged for 5 years)

For some respondents, their hostility towards women underpinned their belief that physical and sexual violence against them was justified:

> I felt like my own social status and lack of wellbeing was their fault for not accepting me rather than me fixing myself for their standards. I felt they deserved violence and I thought rape would be good because they wouldn't accept me. (Respondent 6, engaged for 6–7 years)

> I felt like I was above women and that their problems were mainly simple fabrications of their own mind, and that any violence was asked for or egged on by them, and therefore justified. (Respondent 32, engaged for 5 years)

> I felt like violence wasn't needed except in rare cases and that women needed to be physically corrected sometimes. (Respondent 10, engaged for 4 years)

Some respondents who indicated that they felt hostile towards or distrustful of women did not endorse the use of violence but still felt 'indifferent' or 'apathetic' towards it:

> I was never super down with the violent fantasies, but it didn't bother me as much as it probably should have. (Respondent 14, engaged for 3 years)

However, not all respondents held such negative or hostile attitudes towards women while engaged in online misogynistic incel communities:

> I felt positively towards women when I first became involved with the subculture. I felt that violence and other behaviours towards women were abhorrent. (Respondent 12, engaged for 6 months)

> I actively bristled against dehumanizing women or treating them with violence or aggression; I saw this as a pathetic lashing-out by people unwilling to change or at least come to terms with reality. Basically, my worldview was that it was my fault I was unattractive, and I didn't feel women owed me anything. (Respondent 23, engaged for 1 year)

Changes in attitudes to women

Adoption or strengthening of positive attitudes to women

Following disengagement from online misogynistic incel communities, most respondents described a positive shift in their attitudes towards women and violence against them. Some described becoming more 'empathetic' and 'respectful' of women, and expressed disdain for the use of violence against them, even though they had supported it previously:

> … the violence epidemic against women from men is distressing, and the casual misogyny from increasingly young boys also makes me sick with worry. (Respondent 22, engaged for 2–3 years)

> … I now see women as equals, and no longer joke about violence against them. I genuinely feel awful about how I acted, as now these topics are of great importance as I realise how much they have affected the women in my life. (Respondent 32, engaged for 5 years)

For those who indicated that they had opposed violence even while identifying as an incel, experiences of disengagement were often associated with a strengthening of these attitudes:

> I feel, even more strongly than I did before, that men's negative action towards women are terrible. (Respondent 12, engaged for 6 months)

Limited change in attitudes to women

Concerningly, while the attitudes of some respondents shifted in a non-violent direction after disengaging, these attitudes were sometimes expressed alongside a lingering resentment of women for persistent feelings of rejection:

> Dating still sucks. I'm still expected care about all the gender wars bullshit. (Respondent 8, engaged for 1–2 years)

Some also raised women's violence towards men in an attempt to mitigate the severity of men's violence towards women and their previously supportive attitudes to it:

> The evidence supports the fact that women perpetrate physical violence against male partners roughly as frequently as vice versa, but due to dimorphism women are more likely to be injured. In addition, women engage in significantly more psychological, emotional and verbal abuse of their male partners, sons, and brothers. (Respondent 3, engaged for 15 years)

Importantly, these respondents did not often appear to have interrogated or challenged their views on women and violence against them while disengaging. Rather, these respondents tended to have disengaged as a result of changing interests or priorities, or to have defined their disengagement by their intimate relationships with women.

Adoption of negative attitudes to everyone

Finally, some respondents indicated becoming more broadly misanthropic following disengagement. While their attitudes were not violent, their disengagement coincided with a shift towards apathy or negativity towards all people regardless of gender:

> I think my feelings have shifted to 'most humans are shit' regardless of gender. (Respondent 1, engaged for 3 years)

> I have become far more nihilistic and apathetic towards the suffering of others. Before it was an 'us' (incels, losers, robots, etc) vs 'them' (normies, Jews, etc). Now it's just me and the external world and I want nothing to do with it. (Respondent 33, engaged for 5–8 years)

Discussion

This study sought to understand why and how men disengage from online misogynistic incel communities, and the implications of disengagement for their attitudes towards violence against women. Motivations for disengagement were, overall, consistent with those found in previous literature (eg Burns & Boislard 2024; Hintz & Baker 2021; Osuna 2024; Smith, Butler-Warke & Stevens 2025). The most common motivations were growing dissatisfaction with the communities and exposure to people outside of them. These motivations both appeared to contribute to a sense of disillusionment. Here, many respondents described a gradual realisation that online misogynistic incel communities were not offering solutions to their problems, were not helping them to feel better or were not aligned with their values. Many also pointed to encounters outside of these communities that offered preferable alternatives to them or called the views expressed within them into question. Fundamental to all of these is the triggering of a cognitive shift away from the violent and misogynistic views propagated within online misogynistic incel communities. Previous research has similarly identified disillusionment as critical to successful disengagement (eg Gheorghe & Clement 2025; Thorburn 2023). Disillusionment has similarly emerged as a theme in literature on disengagement from other violent, criminal and deviant groups (eg Douglas & Smith 2018; Tonks & Stephenson 2019; Windisch et al. 2017).

Importantly, a loss of interest also emerged as an important motivator, one that may be relatively unique to disengagement from online misogynistic incel and related communities. This could reflect the lack of formal and tangible mechanisms keeping people connected to these communities—engagement often involves simply viewing online forums or other content, and there is rarely a membership or recruitment process. Rather, people are free to drift into and out of these communities as their circumstances, interests and priorities dictate. Respondents who identified changing interests or sexual experiences with women as their motivation to disengage were less likely to have experienced disillusionment. This may be because such experiences did not call into question the value of online misogynistic incel communities or their underlying ideology. Indeed, previous research has suggested that sexual relationships with women, in the absence of disillusionment, can reaffirm and legitimise men's sense of entitlement (Rothermel & Kelly 2024).

Disillusionment appears to have preceded the implementation of several proactive strategies to disengage. Strategies employed were generally consistent with those identified in previous research (eg Adams & Smith 2025; Burns & Boislard 2024; Gheorghe & Clement 2025). Respondents overwhelmingly spoke about their intentional efforts to cease or reduce access to online misogynistic incel communities, sometimes in combination with other strategies such as engaging with prosocial peers or engaging in self-improvement activities. In the context of violent, criminal and deviant groups more broadly, research has identified positive social relationships, an ability to address personal issues and access social support, the development of a stable and clear sense of identity, and no longer being active within the radicalised group to be fundamental to successful and sustained disengagement (Barelle 2015; see also Horgan et al. 2017).

Importantly, many respondents noted that their disengagement coincided with a growing aversion to violence against women. However, among those whose disengagement was not driven by disillusionment, shifts in attitudes towards violence against women were generally less evident. Research on radicalisation and violent extremism more broadly emphasises the distinction between behavioural disengagement (ending membership of violent extremist groups, terminating contact with radicalised individuals and no longer consuming violent extremist content) and attitudinal disengagement or deradicalisation (relinquishing extremist views and attitudes, and support for violence in pursuit of them; eg Horgan 2008; Horgan et al. 2017). The current findings suggest that, among those disengaging from online misogynistic incel communities, attitudinal change is not uniform and may depend on their reasons for disengaging.

As noted, understanding disengagement from online misogynistic incel and related communities has become crucial to violence prevention efforts (Hoffman, Ware & Shapiro 2020). While research points to the challenges of externally manufacturing disillusionment (Gheorghe & Clement 2025; Simi et al. 2019), the current findings indicate that there may be opportunities to support men once they do decide to disengage, including by providing appropriate formal and informal supports which, among other things, facilitate prosocial and offline social engagements, and activities focused on self-improvement. Critically, as mentioned, disengaging from online misogynistic incel communities was not always associated with attitudinal change. Further, a number of respondents noted that they still came across misogynistic online content. This points to the limitations inherent in blunt measures centred on moderating, removing or blocking access to misogynistic online content. Research has suggested that these measures should be complemented by alternative messaging campaigns that counteract and discredit the violent and misogynistic views expressed in numerous online incel communities (Ashour 2010). Further, implementing media literacy programs may also support men to disengage from online misogynistic incel communities by encouraging critical engagement with online material, which may in turn contribute to violence prevention (Krahé & Busching 2015).

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Laura Doherty is a Senior Research Analyst in the Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence, and Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery Research Programs at the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC).

Dr Christopher Dowling is Research Manager of the Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence, and Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery Research Programs at the AIC.

Meg Dickens is a former Intern at the AIC.

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