

SMITH, D.S. 2025. I spoke to men who swallowed the red pill: what incel culture is really like. *Metro* [online], 19 March 2025. Available from: <https://metro.co.uk/2025/03/19/spoke-men-swallowed-red-pill-incel-culture-really-like-22752536/>

I spoke to men who swallowed the red pill: what incel culture is really like.

SMITH, D.S.

2025

I spoke to men who swallowed the red pill: what incel culture is really like

David Smith (Robert Gordon University)

Originally posted on Metro as "I interviewed 11 incels: this is what I learned", 18 December 2024:

<https://metro.co.uk/2024/12/18/interviewed-11-incels-this-learned-22183966/>

Revised and republished on 19 March 2025: [https://metro.co.uk/2025/03/19/spoke-men-swallowed-red-pill-](https://metro.co.uk/2025/03/19/spoke-men-swallowed-red-pill-incel-culture-really-like-22752536/)

[incel-culture-really-like-22752536/](https://metro.co.uk/2025/03/19/spoke-men-swallowed-red-pill-incel-culture-really-like-22752536/)

Article text

"I'd be lying if I said that I didn't think at least half the group was crazy," Harta* tells me from his home in the US. I can't see him - like other men in my study into the world of incels, he's elected to leave his webcam off.

Still, while he's audibly nervous, Harta also sounds glad to have someone listening. "The first post I saw said 'if my sister truly cared about my issues, she'd allow me to have sex with her...'"

'So I was turned off by that,' he quickly adds.

Harta is a former incel who began frequenting their forums in his early twenties. Short for involuntary celibates, incels are men who believe a combination of their bad genes and modern feminism have left them romantically/sexually destitute. In short, they consider themselves scientifically unloveable.

The trappings of incel culture are currently under the microscope due to Netflix's *Adolescence*, starring Stephen Graham and teenage actor Owen Cooper. In the four-part series, each episode examines the contributing factors that surround a 13-year-old boy murdering a teenage girl.

As a psychologist and a lecturer at Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen, I find incelism equally fascinating and scary. It's one of few subcultures built entirely around inferiority.

Many men go years at a time without having sex, though few make it a core part of their identity. Yet I can *almost* understand why some do. As a teenager, I worried everybody was having sex except me and

catastrophised being alone for the rest of my life. Influencers and dating apps likely amplify these concerns, leaving people a swipe away from rejection.

It's what made me want to interview former members of the incel community to find out why they joined in the first place - and how we can help others leave.

To start the process, I placed ads on dedicated ex-incel groups to see who would be willing to speak - 11 signed up. At first, I was worried about speaking to other men, no less strangers, about something as personal as their sex lives: would they open up?

Thankfully, it seemed cathartic for them, marking the first time most had spoken at length about their secret digital lives.

For example, Harta, now closing in on 30, hasn't told his friends or family he was a member for five years and thinks he never will, due to the group's negative reputation.

"I'm a man. I'm pathetic. I will not hide any longer"

Although surveys suggest over 80% of incels are between 18 and 30, one I spoke to joined at just 12; a shockingly young age to even be thinking about involuntary celibacy.

One of them, Nico*, had felt ugly as far back as he could remember and saw the forums as a place to discuss this without being reassured he was fine. Over time he saw the men in their mid-twenties as teachers who could tell him about things he cared about far more than maths: how the world *really* works.

The other, Tobias*, felt an intrinsic pressure to speak to girls and came across incel content when looking up a video called 'how to know if a girl likes you'.

YouTube then fed him a steady stream of red pill content, leading to him declaring himself an incel and going on their forums. This shows how a relatively innocent and mundane search can bring young people to darker material. Fortunately, he stopped visiting these websites when he was 14 - still worryingly young to be thinking about incel community.

Incels are also more diverse than often thought, with data suggesting only 55% are white; low for a group primarily based in Western Europe and North America. They tend to come from underprivileged backgrounds, with half living with parents/caregivers and 20% being out of education, employment, or training.

Aaron, an ex-incel from the UK, tells me: "I believed that adage 'work hard, be a good person and good things will happen'. But incelism made me realise there are no guarantees."

They are also disproportionately likely to face mental health challenges. Many appear to have poor body image and develop fixations with their weight, height, cheekbones or stature. In addition, up to 75% experience depression or anxiety and 20% report daily suicidal thoughts.

Combined, these data suggest mental health is a major factor in who is most vulnerable to incel ideology - especially since many members report short-term benefits.

First, they get a safe space to share things they wouldn't offline about sexual frustrations and mental health. Second, these sites remove their sense of agency; they explain their virginity as something done to them and participants welcome the notion nothing was their fault.

However, gradually the permanency of their positions became overwhelming. This is called the black pill; when dating is not just difficult but insurmountable.

"Anger feels better than sadness"

Soon, like reverse Top Trumps, they compete to be the most disadvantaged. In this reversed hierarchy, one participant told me, "the alpha male of the incels is the guy who spent the most years a virgin."

Meanwhile, Aaron said discussing killing himself made him feel "powerful" and that "instead of being met with 'oh no, please don't do it', some would say 'same'." It was emotional validation without support.

In a vicious cycle, the constant negativity isolates them further, making them more likely to return to the forums and, therefore, even less motivated. The worse they felt, the angrier they were, and their posts got more hateful, too, including fantasies about sexual violence and mass murder.

"It might be confusing how giving up and feeling completely powerless will lead somebody to be violent. But to me it's not confusing at all," Henry*, a 23-year-old from the USA, told me.

He identified as an incel a year into college after his expectations of getting girls, breezing class, keeping fit and making money gave way to endless rejections, failing exams, a drug problem and what he saw as dead-end jobs.

The forums gave him a secret world where he could take out his disappointment and resentment on others. "At a certain point being down on yourself is too painful so you turn it outward," he explained.

However, over time, his online and offline lives merged, and he became increasingly hostile and withdrawn in his personal life. He recounts how he quit a customer service role in rage because trying made him complicit in his humiliation: "I felt like a eunuch," he admits.

Though misogyny is a central driver, powerlessness and despair underlie the thankfully few major acts of incel violence. These include Elliot Rodger, who killed six people then himself, and others who have harassed, attacked, murdered or stalked people. We do not just need to talk about inceldom to protect young men but also their victims, who are overwhelmingly women.

It wasn't always like this

The first incel website was founded by a woman. In 1997, Alana's Involuntary Celibacy Project united users from around the world, including men, women, and trans people, to discuss shyness. However, over time, it stopped being about strength in numbers as they tried to figure out why they weren't having sex. The men blamed women.

Today, most incels swallow the red pill. Taking its name from *The Matrix*, it supposedly means seeing the world for what it really is. In this case, they argue feminism has overturned a natural sexual economy where the tens slept with each other and so did the sixes and ones. Now, they claim men are socially/sexually disadvantaged because women date upwards, and only the most masculine (known as Chads) can attract them.

Content creator Andrew Tate (who is facing charges for sex trafficking and rape) exploits insecure boys/men wanting to win a rigged game. For them, it's easy to see why a muscular Bugatti driver telling them how to get girls is aspirational.

However, despite being called an incel in parliament, most incels call Tate a scam artist.

To them, he effortlessly embodies the Chad masculinity they could never emulate, no matter how much work they put in. While he and his followers position themselves as winners in the dating market, incels are resigned to being the losers. It is in this shared sense of failure that they bond.

As Aaron tells me, "the weird kids must form their own collectives because they have been outcast."

"If I want to see thirty, I have to leave"

Fortunately, men leave incelism all the time, even if they're still not sexually active. Most I spoke to were still virgins, but transitions like moving to a city, graduating, meeting new friends and gaining financial security made them reevaluate their pessimistic outlook.

With Henry, getting a degree-relevant job where he wasn't going through the motions gave him a feeling of accomplishment and he came to believe things could get better.

For this reason, among others, we must address inequalities in employment, housing, and education, or we risk exacerbating the existential angst for which incelism provides one damaging response.

The current cost of living crisis may be a radicalising force for young men who have internalised the idea they need to be traditional providers while living at home well into their twenties.

A sea-change in how men's mental health is discussed could also remove the allure forums have as places to vent. Likewise, we need a cultural shift in how young people learn about gender relations, consent and online safety.

Though we should hate incelism as a worldview, we need compassion for those caught within it as the impact could be wider than we realise.

I worry about my students, as many will fear for their children. While the answers incelism offers young men are harmful, the questions are very human: What am I doing with my life? Am I desirable? Is anybody going to love me?

It's important that we address these constructively for the good of them and those they might harm.

*names have been changed