



Incels (involuntary celibates): a possible case for bare branches in the United States

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Abstract

The rise of an online community of predominantly young men denominated incels presents a domestic security risk and, potentially, an international one, linked to 59 murders. This investigation seeks to understand inceldom through the lens of bare branches, a concept derived from Feminist Security Studies: low-status young males in Asia who are unable to mate due to skewed sex ratios and are responsible for committing the majority of violent crime within a state. This leads to the objective of determining whether incels are a Western manifestation of bare branches. A theory and concept driven case study of incels in the United States with secondary quantitative sources as methods for data collection was applied to analyze trends in labor, education and wealth inequality, addressing a gap in the literature concerning the structural causes of inceldom. Findings suggest that many incels are part of the group of men affected by the educational outperformance of women, a decline in real wages and jobs for blue collar workers as well as the maintenance of rigid gender role expectations, creating a group of low status, unpartnered men triggered by feminism.

Keywords: Low Status Young Men, Patriarchal grievances, Women's Safety, Gender Wage Gap, Neoliberalism

Introduction

The rise of the incel, Involuntary Celibate, online subculture rooted in misogyny, as well as the violent criminal acts (e.g. assault, homicide) carried out by a number of its members has led to an increase in the study of the phenomenon. Involuntary celibates refers to a grouping of individuals who, despite wanting to be sexually active, are not. The community is male dominated, and its members oscillate between self-deprecation and grandiosity. In order to deal with feelings of perceived masculine inferiority they often direct their aggression at a system which they believe as hostile towards their form of masculinity, favoring hypermasculine men, the women who they believe reject them and the men that women select as mates (Baele et al., 2021). They ascribe to a patriarchal ideology which purports that women are only interested in men of higher social status, whether this be due to certain physical features they deem to be attractive or hypermasculine, or wealth, for example, and that they should be subservient to men (Cottee, 2021; Hoffman et al., 2020; Vink et al., 2023). However, many incels believe there is no point in trying to gain status through other means than facial attractiveness like going to the gym or wealth and educational acquisition because they hold that women predominantly select mates based on the former. Thus, while women may date men with other status markers, they will do this based solely for resource acquisition while truly desiring to be with physically attractive men, which leads them to conclude that these men are cuckolds (Rousis et al., 2024). Additionally, incels see themselves as being at the bottom of the social hierarchy when they should be on top, thus justifying violence towards women, especially feminists, and their mates in order to restore society based on a patriarchal world view (Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019; Sparks et al., 2022).

The literature thus far has failed to study the incel phenomenon through the lens of the concept of bare branches which is why this study aims to fill the gap in understanding of the implications it may hold from a security studies perspective. Bare branches is a Chinese term

that refers to the branches of family trees that will not bear fruit due to the inability of males to find a female partner with whom to mate. This issue occurred in Asia due to skewed sex ratios stemming from cultural parental preferences in male offspring leading to female infanticide. Hudson and den Boer (2002) identified the increase of bare branches (single, low status young men) between the ages of 15-34/35 as a security risk because this is the group within societies responsible for the committal of the majority of violent crime. This leads to a rise in authoritarianism to mitigate the increase in violent crime and can even be linked to more bellicose foreign policy as elites send these young men to war to procure peace at home. In the west the sex ratio is not skewed in the way that is occurring in some Asian countries. However, the inability for a large part of the male population to access economic resources and status may create a similar effect.

Feminist international relations (IR) critically views mainstream IR theories such as realism and liberalism positing that there is a patriarchal/masculinist bias in the field (Cohn, 1987; Tickner, 1992). These theories applied to international security assemble the international system into a malist, militaristic one (Elshtain, 1987). Feminist security studies (FSS) underscores the importance of gender in understanding security issues at the international, regional, national and local levels (Enloe, 1989). A broader comprehension of security allows for the development of frameworks that include and uncover security threats previously unconsidered by conventional approaches (Hansen, 2000; Sjoberg, 2013; Williams, 2017).

If the concept of Bare Branches and their potential effects on local, domestic and international security are applied to the United States, the following data potentially paint a grim picture as single, low-status young males are more likely to lash out violently against a society they feel excludes them. In the United States males were responsible for 81% of all arrests for the committal of violent crime and around 63% of all arrests for property crime (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2011, as cited in University of Minnesota, 2015). Additionally, a study by Fry and Parker (2021) on the rise of unpartnered men and women in the United States shows that the percentage of single adults has increased from 29% in 1990 to 38% in 2019. The results are concerning as unpartnered men seemed to fare substantially worse than their partnered counterparts as well as unpartnered women as pertains to economic, employment, education and mental well-being. In terms of economic outcomes, in 2019, 73% of unpartnered men were employed in comparison with 91% of partnered men. Whereas 77% of unpartnered women in 2019 were employed versus 74% of partnered women. Regarding median earnings in the same year unpartnered men fell considerably behind partnered men, \$35,000 to \$57,000, respectively. Educational markers showed similar discrepancies with only 26% of unpartnered males having attained a college degree in contrast to 37% of partnered men. Notably, women had better results in this marker than men where 33% of unpartnered women and 43% of partnered women held degrees. Reviewing these apparently disparate issues in conjunction with one another is pertinent for the aims of the present study as it seeks to understand if and how Bare Branches manifest in the West. The question then arises if the perceived wrongs that incels highlight in their ideology are fueled, in part, by income inequality.

Since Incel ideology attributes the inability to find a mate to a lack of status it is relevant to consider what, if any, systemic factors may be contributing to this belief. Reeves (2022) describes the situation of young men in the United States as increasingly worrying. This is not true for elite, high achieving men, they find themselves at the top of the wage pyramid. What his study demonstrates is that as gender equality has become increasingly realized in the

country women are filling the middle tier of the pyramid, leaving a high percentage of men at the bottom. Due to policies that have made access to higher education fairer, women are outperforming men. The ratio for admittance is 2:1 and once actually in university, men are much more likely to drop out. It is interesting to note that Title IX was enacted in 1972, where we begin to see a steady increase in women's wages. This is an overall trend that is true of all the OECD countries. The median annual earnings of men ages 25 to 34 working full time, full year, in 2022 dollars in the US was \$45,000 USD while for college graduates it was \$77,000 USD (Fry et al., 2024). This is compounded by the effect of free trade agreements on blue collar jobs, for example, 2 to 3 million jobs lost in the manufacturing industry to Chinese imports (Autor et al., 2021), on one side, and on the other side, the looming threat of automation. Additionally, 6.8% of the population saw a net loss in real income despite cheaper prices in consumer goods coming from China (Autor et al., 2021). It is to be expected then, that life-time earnings have increased by 33% for women, whereas men's earnings have declined by about 10% since 1983 if compared to those who entered the workforce in 1967 (Guvenen et al., 2022, as cited in Reeves, 2022). When men feel they are being left by the wayside by society, dire consequences may arise as regards women's and society's security as has been the case demonstrated by Hudson and den Boer (2002). Considering the security threat posed by incels, it is worth understanding if the violent crime that some members of the incel community perpetrate is a way of procuring status within the group because they feel unable to do so through more traditional means, much in the same way that bare branches have been shown to do.

The drop in testosterone levels that coincides with courting and then marriage in men could be a leading factor in married men being less likely to engage in antisocial behavior. For example, married men are significantly less likely to kill an unrelated male than single men. When testosterone drops the proclivity towards partaking in behaviors like trouble with the law, substance abuse, violent behavior, rule breaking and rebellion diminish substantially (Mazur & Michalek, 1998; Mazur & Booth, 1998; Courtwright, 1996, as cited in Hudson and den Boer, 2002). When societies produce significant numbers of bare branches the likelihood of organized banditry increases. As men convene, they are more susceptible to status and reputation, competing with one another to achieve higher standing among peers. With men who do not have access to formal pathways to the attainment of status, like in the case of bare branches, the behavior exhibited in these environments becomes increasingly risky and violent as they try to one up each other. This, in tandem with the outcast subculture that brings them together creates an environment that disregards the preservation of the prevailing social order (Hudson and den Boer, 2002).

That the rise of inceldom comes at a time when there is an increase in single men that are not doing as well as their partnered counterparts and when the rules based international order is being eroded due to the political and economic elite's creation, in part and its mishandling of various global crises makes increasingly worrisome what Wright, Boone, Mesquida, and Weiner suggest, that high sex-ratio societies are only governable by authoritarian regimes (1994; 1986; 1996 as cited in Hudson & den Boer, 2002). The current study seeks to determine if the United States is facing a situation of bare branches, if for other reasons than countries like China or India, and how this affects violence on a national scale.

This study asks if incels are a Western form of bare branches. Consequently, it will be important to understand how factors like female empowerment trigger incel ideology. Hudson et al. (2008) demonstrated that women's security within a state correlates with how peaceful or not that state is intra and internationally. For this reason, this study's focus on the United

States is particularly relevant: its findings could lead to interest in further research regarding the effects of bare branches and women's lack of security on the foreign policy of the international system's only superpower as well as the rise of figures with authoritarian tendencies like Donald Trump. This is relevant considering the imperialist rhetoric and actions employed by the current Trump Administration (Davies & Wendling, 2025; The White House, 2025).

The present article is organized into four main sections. First, it offers a description and comprehensive characterization of incels. Second, the methodology section reports that the study is qualitative, applying a theory and concept driven case study of the incel community in the United States using secondary qualitative and quantitative data as methods for data collection. The analysis of the collected data follows a process-tracing logic to determine the causal mechanisms behind the incel security risk by studying shifting trends in the labor market, education, wages and dating in the era of dating apps. The third section reviews the article's theoretical and conceptual framework, approaching the issue of incels through the theoretical lens of feminist security studies that considers the importance of gender in determining security risks otherwise by mainstream theories. On the conceptual level the study applies the concept of bare branches as a lens to understand the scope of the incel security risk considering the wide-reaching ramifications of the phenomenon in previous cases. In the fourth section the findings and discussion are presented, analyzed through the theoretical and conceptual framework previously stated and are situated within subsections that provide key insights into the unfolding process of incels in the United States. Next, a psychoanalytic approach is applied to understand the psychological functioning of incels towards self and others. Lastly, the conclusion section restates findings, answers the research question, and proposes future avenues for research.

Involuntary Celibates

The present study finds most appropriate the definition of incels proposed by Costello et al. (2024),

However, we suggest that any definition based on a metric of time is too broad and does not reflect the incel social identity (Costello, 2023). Due to the subjective nature of involuntary celibacy (i.e., it is impossible to prove that an individual objectively *can't* form sexual or romantic relationships), the identity requires an individual to embrace it and integrate it into their sense of self (Rousis et al., 2023). (p. 1)

These individuals usually meet certain criteria like having significantly poorer mental health when compared to non-incel single men, engaging in misogynistic online hostility (Costello et al., 2022; Moskalenko et al., 2022; Sparks et al., 2022, 2023; Speckhard & Ellenberg, 2022; Jaki et al, 2019, as cited in Costello et al., 2024). Among the incel community there is a widely held belief that because of hypergamy women do not value them as mates and are mostly coveted by a small number of men that they pejoratively denominate as *chads*, good looking, wealthy, high status men. In the incel paradigm, Looks, Money, Status (LMS) is seen to be the prevailing female sexual operational framework (Baele et al., 2021; Cottee, 2021; Hoffman et al., 2020; Vink et al., 2023).

Consequently, these tenets of their ideology lead them to the belief that women and feminism are at the root of their marginalization in particular, and men's subservience in general. Based on theories derived from theories evolutionary psychology and biological determinism on sex and gender they consider that the natural order of society should be

patriarchal and desire a return to men's dominance over women, which includes women's subservience to men and access to women's bodies as a right (Fowler et al., 2023). This is what Price (2024) has termed retrogressive worlding, as the mobilization of differing conservative, far and populist- right wing thinking in opposition to feminist ideology and an imagined shaping of the social order. Thus, incels deem that the soft power that women wield over men (gate keeping of sex) justifies violence against them as emancipatory and anti-establishment (Fowler et al., 2023; Price, 2024). Accordingly, only men can be incels as the ideology holds that any woman who claims to be involuntarily celibate is actually a volcel, voluntarily celibate, as it is women who have the power to decide when and with whom to have sex.

While few incels have committed direct violence, the mass killings perpetrated by some members have left 59 victims, the indirect online violence against women that characterizes the comments left on the forums that incels frequent (Fowler et al., 2023; Baele et al., 2021; Baele et al., 2024) reflect many, if not all of, the mechanisms that Albert Bandura (1999) outlined in his theory of moral disengagement that make direct violence much easier to enact. This behavior is concerning as membership is reported to be between 40,000 to hundreds of thousands (Beauchamp, 2019; Kutchinsky, 2019, as cited in Costello et al., 2023). As the incel subculture continues to grow the probability that individuals who are vulnerable to committing acts of direct violence come across this ideology and justify violence against women to reestablish what they deem to be the natural social order in the name of the incel community increases.

Methodology

The methodology applied by this study is qualitative, employing a theory and concept driven case study of the incel community in the United States with secondary quantitative data for descriptive support as methods for data collection. The period of study, 1972 to 2025, was determined by the consistent increase in women's wages coinciding with the enactment of Title IX in 1972 as it "prohibits discrimination based on sex in education programs and activities that receive federal financial assistance" (Reeves, 2022; U.S. Department of Education, 2026). The primary unit of analysis is the United States as it is the site of numerous incel attacks, part of the Western world and there being rigorous and easily accessible data on the gender wage gap as well as on incels in the country.

The question of whether incels are Western bare branches is analyzed through the lens of Feminist Security Studies. The concept of bare branches is employed to understand the security implications both on a local, national and international level of the incel security risk as regards women's safety and the possible negative consequences of bare branches (unpartnered, low status males) on peace and democracy.

Due to the nature of the research question, and the sub questions that arise, the triangulation method of approach afforded by this model can, as pointed out by Tzagkarakis and Kritas, "bring out more dimensions of the researched subject, both in depth and in total, minimize the inherent bias in each individual source, method and research approach, as well as achieve greater credibility with regard to the resulting data" (2023, p. 40-41). Qualitative and quantitative secondary data was drawn from peer-reviewed academic research, institutional datasets, security databases, and official policy documents. This includes academic databases like JSTOR, Taylor & Francis, SpringerLink, Sage Journals, PubMed and APA PsychNet. Descriptive quantitative data was extracted from government and institutional repositories such as the U.S Census Bureau, Federal Bureau of Investigation (Uniform Crime Reporting

Program), U.S. Department of Education, Pew Research Center as well as from scholarly research found in the aforementioned academic databases.

The secondary source quantitative data used in this study aims to aid in the contextualization of trends in the following variables: education, labor, wages, relationship status among adults, violent crime perpetration; as well as other demographic characteristics in order to illustrate structural patterns, support theoretical interpretation and provide descriptive background. Finally, this study employed a theory and concept driven narrative integrative literature review (Hillebrand et al., 2001) to synthesize interdisciplinary scholarship on incelism, security studies, gender studies, sociology, psychoanalysis and international political economy.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Feminist Security Studies

Feminism and Gender Defined

For feminist scholars in international relations and its subfield, security studies, gender, while associated with biological sex classes, is not the same as belonging to one of them. Gender is actually a socially constructed system which creates social hierarchies by prescribing to people, events, institutions, activities, etc. masculine and feminine characteristics. This dualistic form of thought creates hierarchy through various types of dichotomies through the othering of that which is different and therefore less than. In this gendered social hierarchy both men and women place higher value on masculinity, fomenting the system. Feminist international relations critically views the patriarchal/masculinist bias in the field where state-centric models of the system contribute to assembling the international system that privileges a malist and militarist understanding of one, as well as contributes to its creation. Feminists working in security studies have revisited traditionally relevant concepts in the subfield, arriving at the conclusion that there is a gender bias in what is studied and the language employed by mainstream scholars, for example, violence, war and peace (Wilcox, 2009, as cited in Sjoberg, 2009). Approaching the incel issue in this gendered manner may elucidate how society shapes the perceptions of these men and their grievances with what they believe they are owed for being men: status and women. Additionally, how the state can better respond to this issue by revising its core malist/patriarchal beliefs about security, who is affected, who matters and what to do about it.

Women and Peace Theory Explained

Hudson et al. started their article titled the Heart of the Matter with the question “what are the roots of conflict and insecurity for states?” (2008, pg.1). They argue that while civilizational differences, political regime type, socioeconomics (poverty and lack of access to resources) are all relevant factors to consider, one that had not been considered in the field of security studies was the treatment of women within society. The women and peace thesis proposed by the authors looks at the role of evolutionary biology/psychology theories to better understand the causes behind this relationship and sociological theories like social diffusion and psychological theories of social learning for more proximate causal mechanisms. They then proceed to determine that there is a robust, positive relationship between physical security of women and three measures of state security and peacefulness. In general, the societies where women were physically safe were more democratic, developed and experienced less levels of

violence. When compared to other explanatory factors of security, such as level of democracy, level of economic development, and civilizational identity, women's physical security was a better predictor for state security.

Bare Branches

With the relevance of this relationship established, as well as the importance of looking at security studies through a feminist lens, the article, *A surplus of Men, a Deficit of Peace* outlines the relationship between international security and the internal stability of states. They suggest that gender equality within states is relevant to the overall security of a region. The cultural preference for male offspring in Asian countries like China and India lead to female infanticide which skew birth sex ratios. This, in turn, leads to an effect of bare branches: low status men who are unable to find mates. The poor are disproportionately affected by this phenomenon and find themselves grouping together and encouraging violent acts as a currency for status. In China, these groups of young, and marginalized males make up most of the floating or transient population as well as being involved in committing violent crime and crime in general. Different studies found that, of this population of 100-150 million people 80% are under the age of 35 and between 72-75% male (United States Embassy in China, n.d; Zhao, 1997; Zang, et al., 1997; Gilley, 1996).

While bare branches are understood to be the cultural preference for male offspring and a high male to female sex ratio by the authors, this is not the case in the United States where there is no surplus of men. The current study then looks to understand if incels are self-perceived bare branches and if they are men with, apparently, no mating opportunities and if this coincides with a higher number of misogynistic men. The following section aims to outline how certain factors like traditional perceptions about masculinity and femininity are still rigid in the United States and how this is compounded by lower status men being disproportionately affected by the gender wage gap and post-secondary degree acquisition, perhaps underlying incel ideology. As incels's perception leads them to believe their grievances (inability to mate with women) are a result of society's injustice towards them, they seek to restore "traditional gender norms of male dominance, maintain systemic inequality between men and women, and manifest gender-based hate crimes" (Edwards, 2022, p. 1). This behavior is in accordance with what some scholars propose that men, like any group occupying the top tier of the dominance hierarchy, may actively resist change in the power dynamic (Good, 1982; Pierotti et al., 2018, as cited in Frye & Urbina, 2020)

Gender Wage Gap

incels often highlight that their inability to find a romantic or sexual partner is due to the superficial preferences of women. Considering this claim, one of the inquiries the present study seeks to understand is if, in fact, incelism is related to an increase in the gender wage gap. In the United States differing factors have led to a general loss of blue collar jobs to the international market in the United States, as well as a trend of stagnant real wages that are unable to keep up with inflation, with the purchasing power of 2018 almost mirroring 1978's; meanwhile, those in the top tenth of the distribution have seen their real wages rise a cumulative 15,7% since 2002 (Desilver, 2018; Reeves, 2022). This is compounded by the effects of a 2:1 ratio of females accessing post-secondary education in higher numbers than their male counterparts. The actual ratio of professional degree attainment is even more skewed in favor of female acquisition due to a higher dropout rate for males once they are enrolled in the institutions (Reeves, 2022).

Thus, while there is still a gender wage gap that favors men in the United States, the earnings pyramid is distributed as follows: a small percentage of men occupy the top tier, with women increasingly occupying the middle tier and the largest tier at the bottom being filled by men (Reeves, 2022). According to Desilver,

Since 2002, usual weekly wages have risen 3% (in real terms) among workers in the lowest tenth of the earnings distribution and 4.3% among the lowest quarter [...] Sluggish and uneven wage growth has been cited as a key factor behind widening income inequality in the United States. A recent Pew Research Center report, based on an analysis of household income data from the Census Bureau, found that in 2016 Americans in the top tenth of the income distribution earned 8.7 times as much as Americans in the bottom tenth (\$109,578 versus \$12,523). In 1970, when the analysis period began, the top tenth earned 6.9 times as much as the bottom tenth (\$63,512 versus \$9,212). (2018, para. 11)

With a similar dynamic happening in Uganda, due to the slow blue collar labor market which men are tending to predominantly occupy, as women are accessing post secondary-education more, and the persistence of hypergamy ideals, men tend to feel unable to fill the societal role that they believe is expected of them, leaving them feeling undervalued and frustrated. Many adopt an attitude towards high status women that distorts the reality of the mating discrepancies, labeling them undesirable as opposed to “unattainable” (Frye & Urbina, 2020). Considering what research shows about behavioral gender norms remaining mostly rigid in the United States despite social status progress for women, much in the same way as has happened in Uganda, it seems that similar behavioral results are occurring among low status males in the US (Prentice & Carranza, 2002; Rumand & Glick, 2002; England, 2010; Charles & Grudsky, 2004; Knight and Brinton, 2017, as cited in Frye & Urbina, 2020). This may be one of the contributing factors to the rise of online male dominated communities that engage in violent discourse against women, such as incels.

A report by Pew Research Center studies the proportion of partnered versus unpartnered population in the United States and the resulting implications. In an analysis of a census conducted by the institution in 2019 it was found that in adults ages 25 to 54 38% were unpartnered, which is a large increase from 1990 where 29% shared the same status. In addition, it is mostly men who make up the unpartnered population, this result differs from the data collected 30 years ago where the sexes were evenly distributed in the category. The 2019 data shows that 39% of men were unpartnered versus 36% of women, whereas in 1990 there was only 29% unpartnered in each sex (Fry & Parker, 2021).

The negative effects of this reality may be reinforced by the conclusion that those who are partnered have higher levels of well-being than those who are unpartnered. Unpartnered men and women tend to have lower earnings, on average, are less likely to be employed or economically independent, and have lower levels of education. This could have implications for the mental and physical health of this portion of the population which could lead to an increased risk for the rest of society. While there is a high percentage of unpartnered women who should also be of concern for policy makers and social scientists, the risk will more than likely be on an individual level; whereas, due to what we understand about who commits violent crime, “cross-culturally, an overwhelming percentage of violent crime is perpetrated by young, unmarried, low-status males” (Hudson & den Boer, 2002, pp. 12-13), unpartnered males should be an important concern for security reasons. In accordance with this data, as

concerns this study specifically, in the United States, males were responsible for 81% of all arrests for the committal of violent crime and around 63% of all arrests for property crime (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2011, as cited in University of Minnesota, 2015). Taking these findings into consideration, it is pertinent to study the gender wage gap and its role in incelism. That is to say, are incels part of the group of men being left behind economically in the neoliberal era? And, consequently, could a decrease in access to resources be hindering, in part, their ability to find romantic or sexual partners considering the social expectations placed on men by themselves and others because of the maintenance of rigid gender norms in the country?

Findings and Discussion

Involuntary celibates: a case for bare branches in the United States?

When taking into account the various similarities between the two groups, it becomes pertinent to ask whether incels may be a Western manifestation of bare branches. incels are predominantly young men who feel they have been marginalized because they do not embody what they believe is the kind of masculinity that women and society value (Baele et al., 2021; Costello et al., 2025; Cottee, 2021; Hoffman et al., 2020; Preston et al., 2021; Puhmann & Schlaerth, 2024; Vink et al., 2023). However, there is evidence to suggest that many incels are not university educated and middle to lower class (Costello et al. 2025). Even for those who are middle class, a study done by Pew Research demonstrates that middle income families saw their wealth decrease by 20% from 2001 to 2020. For those in the lower income tier, the reduction in wealth was 45% for the same time frame (Menasce Horowitz et al., 2020). While in Asia, parental preference for male offspring leads to a skewed sex ratio that leaves men that have fewer resources within a society unable to partner due to hypergamy (women tending to marry upwards in social class). Bare branches have been shown to congregate in groups, left with no formal paths to status within society, these men incite each other into committing escalating acts of violence as a way of acquiring status internally (Hudson and den Boer, 2002).

A similar dynamic is exhibited by incels who congregate not in person but in online forums (Baele et al., 2021; Lounela & Murphy, 2024; O'Malley, 2022). When an incel commits an act of direct violence, they garner status within the group. For example, Elliot Rodger, Alek Minassian, and other incels who have perpetrated mass murders are often referred to as saints by other incels. Consequently, it is common to see incels mutually incite one another into committing acts of violence. Often, they term this as going ER which refers to the mass murder committed by Elliot Rodger (Baele et al., 2021). What Hudson and den Boer (2022) demonstrated is that the bare branch phenomenon can have different causes, like in 1500s Portugal where second sons of nobility did not have the resources to marry and have children as inheritance went solely to first born sons. The consequences, however, are the same, a large group of unmarried young men who are responsible for committing a majority of the violence within a society. Thus, the present study suggests that bare branches can manifest in differing ways owing to the unique circumstances that arise in each case from societal, temporal, economic, and cultural specificities.

Building on the prior point, a number of incels have been involved in violent crime, where approximately 59 people have been killed by incels around the world (Costello et al., 2023). Van der Veer (2020) asks what do incels want from and who do they target with violence? In 2020 a man committed a mass shooting in Glendale, Arizona. He identified

himself, allegedly, to his prosecutors as an incel and that the mass shooting was aimed at targeting couples. Days before, a minor was charged in Toronto, Canada for killing a woman and injuring a man in a stabbing attack, also inspired by inceldom.

Incels tend to carry intense anger towards women who they believe do not value them as mates, the derogatory term used for them is *stacys*, but women are not the only target of incels feelings of inferiority that turn into hatred and later violence. *Chads*, men who they deem to be hypermasculine, physically and economically attractive who covet the majority of female sexual attention are railed against, not only in online forums but in manifestos written by incels and in the physical world (Bael et al., 2021; Meier & Sharp, 2024; Menzie, 2022). This seems to express what Daly and Wilson (1990) consider to be killing the competition. For example, Elliot Rodger, a well-known incel for his perpetration of the 2014 Isla Vista killings in California, USA as well as a lesser-known individual Alek Minassian, perpetrator of the 2018 Toronto Van attack assert that they were also targeting men.

Economic, Identitarian and Romantic Discontents in the Neoliberal Era: Cultivating Bare Branches in the West

To understand the rise of inceldom it is necessary to contextualize its discontents within the neoliberal era. After World War II the idea of neoliberalism was not mainstream; in fact, there was a consensus around Keynesian economics as a way of circumventing the troughs of the business cycles. During the Great Depression, Keynes argued that its cause lay in the fall in total demand and that it was so pronounced that significant increases in government spending were the only way to stimulate sufficient demand. However, it was not until the Roosevelt government's substantial increase in spending, necessary for the United States' entry into WWII, did the unemployment rate go from 14.6 to normal levels. Augmenting the acceptance by economists, historians and politicians of Keynes's explanation (Caldwell & O'Driscoll, 2007). Additionally, in Western Europe the birth of the welfare state saw an increase in the size of the state and its intervention in the economy as a response to the Cold War period (Petersen et al., 2022).

With the governments of Thatcher and Reagan the term Neoliberalism began being associated with policies that had the aim of deregulating capital markets, free trade globalization, privatization of state-owned enterprises, the diminution of the state and placing a higher responsibility on the individual (Peters, 2023). A study done by Pew Research Center demonstrates how wealth disparity has changed over time, roughly from when this economic doctrine became mainstream. Markedly, the middle class has been reduced, going from 61% of adults living in middle-income homes in 1971 to 51% in 2019. In this time period, the upper-income tier increased from 14% to 29% and the lower income tier also saw a rise from 25% to 29%. Initially, as the top tier increased more than the bottom tier this could be construed as a positive indicator. However, the reduced middle-class tier saw a considerably less significant gain than the top tier, in the established period seeing a gain of 49% compared to 64%. When looking at the wealth gap, an even larger divide can be evidenced. Upper-income families increased their wealth from 2001 to 2016 by 33% where middle- and lower-income families saw theirs decrease by 20% and 45% respectively. This leaves upper income families with 7.4 and 75 times the wealth that middle- and lower-class families have. There is a substantial rise in these ratios when compared to those from 1983, 3.4, and 28 (Menasce Horowitz et al., 2020).

This may be explained partly by the effects of offshoring on the United States labor market where low-paying jobs are moved offshore while high-paying jobs are not (Oldenski, 2012 as cited in Barbe & Riker, 2018) and may, with automation, have led to the decrease in

the number of workers employed in manufacturing from close to 20 million in 1980 to just over 12 million by 2017 (Barbe & Riker, 2018). Synchronously, certain feminist demands were implemented through state governance during this period as well as on the supracorporate level by the private sector and international organizations like the World Bank, Wall Street and Silicon Valley. These initiatives while having positive outcomes such as improved gender equity through the feminization of the work force, or like the positive effects of Title IX in the demographic changes seen in education where women are outperforming men which allowed for their increased access to higher income jobs (Reeves, 2022; Price, 2024). Despite these improvements the arrangement between governance and select feminist goals seems to have obfuscated the real and continued need for emancipatory demands of political feminism and the preservation of a patriarchal hierarchy evidenced in the still reduced role of women in leadership positions in the work force (Price, 2024).

While much progress is still needed to achieve real gender equality, what Gill et al. refers to as postfeminist sensibility can create the sense that it already has been. Postfeminist sensibility is a circulating set of ideas, images and meanings wherein feminism is rhetorically and performatively highlighted in the media through feminist talking points and the showcasing of female icons. Additionally, feminist iconography, ideas and sentiment are commodified by pop culture and international corporations to brand and sell products. The heightened attention placed on feminism in these industries can give the appearance that the social order is no longer patriarchal. This sensibility in conjunction with neoliberal postulates has given rise to a popular feminism (2020, as cited in Price, 2024). This mainstreaming of a performative feminism obscures not only the reality of where gender equality actually stands and how much still needs to be done but also serves as a scapegoat for the financial disparity that an age of neoliberal economic policies has meant for the rapidly disappearing middle class in the United States as well as for worsening conditions in the working class. The grievances of incels that feel they have been left behind in the neoliberal era instead of being drivers to enact real political and economic change are viewed as being consequences of feminist hegemony (Baele, et al., 2021; Price, 2024).

This understanding of the cultural, political and economic landscape leads incels to use feminism and women as scapegoats, wherein they view antifeminism as being emancipatory and transgressive against mainstream social and moral norms. Their belief in the total trans

actionality of sexual and romantic relationships shapes their view of this sphere of human interaction as a sexual marketplace. This transposing of an understanding of free market capitalism onto interpersonal relationships highlights how neoliberalism permeates the metapolitics of incels. Price (2024) outlines how across incel spaces as well as his subsample the belief that the starting point for feminist hegemony was the Sexual Revolution of the 1960s either on a global scale or more commonly held, as a Western process. This was also found in Baele et al. (2021) as a frequent reason given on Incel forums for inceldom. This coincides roughly with the implementation of Title IX in the United States and the steady increase of women in higher education and eventually in white collar jobs (Reeves, 2022).

Research done by Sparks et al. (2024) points to an important variable to be considered in the creation of incels's belief that sexual and romantic interactions between men and women can be encapsulated in a marketplace: their experience on dating apps. As dating apps accrue possible partners in one source and amplify an otherwise reduced dating pool (usually limited to public meeting spaces, social circles, etc.) users, in order to not be overwhelmed by choice, employ strategies for selection that are of a more superficial nature that would be mitigated by in person encounters. This can mean selecting for status in various ways, such as physical

attractiveness and access to resources. In two studies where individuals were exposed to a higher number of potential mates, they reduced the amount of “likes” given to other users by 29% showing signs of selection fatigue which may indicate the need for reserving cognitive resources for potential partners that exhibit status markers in their profile pictures or bios. What the results of this study outline is a difficult reality for the self-proclaimed incels sampled. Incels, when compared to their non-inceal counterparts, were more indiscriminate in their selection process, setting wider age ranges, proximity radiuses and swiped right on two-thirds more profiles. This usage of dating apps may seem to run counter intuitive to the common understanding that incels feel entitled to sex or have standards that are too high as Sparks et al. (2024) suggest, corroborated by Costello et al. (2025)

This is supported by a study conducted by Brooks et al. (2022) that studied the relationship between incel activity on social media sites and local mating ecology. The researchers demonstrated that in areas where there was a skewed sex ratio (more men than women), high income inequality and the gender wage gap was reduced there was a higher rate of tweets containing incel related terms. Additionally, this coincides with the data collected by Costello et al. (2025) which is the largest primary investigation conducted thus far of incels in the literature ($N=561$). The participants were recruited in the US, and the UK, and key demographic data was collected that corroborates the qualitative findings in the literature. 64.5% of the participants were from the US, a statistically significant sample size which is an important source of data for the present case study of incels in the USA. The information collected for the participants residing in the UK is also valuable as the current study questions if incels are the bare branches of the West.

The demographic data collected by Costello et al. (2025) of incels when contrasted with what is known about bare branches in Asia is striking in their parallels. Per the data, incels had an average age of 25.41 in the US and 26.86 in the UK. The bare branches of interest to Hudson and den Boer (2002) were those in the age range of 15-34/25 because this is the age group responsible for committing most of the violent crime in society. When they asked who these Chinese surplus young males were in 2002, they compared them to their US counterparts,

Who are these young surplus males? First, they are not equivalent to the bachelors of the West. Single men in the West are not surplus males: Indeed, they can and often do form semipermanent attachments to women and produce children in that context. Surplus males, on the other hand, do not have such possibilities. In a marriage market where women are scarce and thus able to "marry up," certain characteristics of young surplus males are easily and accurately predicted. They are liable to come from the lowest socioeconomic class, be un- or underemployed [...] and socialize with other bachelors. In sum, these young surplus males may be considered, relatively speaking, losers in societal competition. (P. 12)

As the present study has outlined, conditions in the US have changed. Pew research shows that 63% of men under the age of 30 reported being single in the US in 2022. The participants of the study done by Costello et al. (2025) fall into this category. The majority of participants were middle to lower middle class, with 14.9% being lower, 24.9% lower-middle, and 40.3% being middle. Only 16.9% were upper-middle class, and only 3% were upper-class. As was posited previously in the present study, the current economic situation has significantly declined for those in the middle to low class. In terms of education a substantial majority of incel participants do not hold an undergraduate degree (77.1%) and even less have completed post-graduate studies with only 6.6% having done so. As stated previously, on average, workers who did not receive a college degree earn, on average \$35,000 USD less than their college

educated counterparts (Fry et al., 2024) and coupled with the effects of free-trade agreements which have seen to the loss of 2 to 3 million manufacturing jobs (Autor et al., 2021) (just one example of the blue collar sector undergoing losses because of neoliberal policies). It then stands to reason that only 5.8% of the participants were homeowners, and the majority (53%) reported living with parents or grandparents.

That 90% of participants stated that the grounds for their singlehood was involuntary celibacy and 98% had no children may stem from the previous findings considering their lack of access to resources and status as well as the maintenance of rigid gender roles in the US (Prentice & Carranza, 2002; Rumand & Glick, 2002; England, 2010; Charles & Grudsky, 2004; Knight and Brinton, 2017, as cited in Frye & Urbina, 2020) despite women's new found access to greater financial independence. It should be kept in mind that the concept of bare branches stems from those branches of family trees that do not bear fruit. This supports the causal factors proposed by the current study for inceldom being a Western form of bare branches for reasons other than skewed sex ratios and may explain the finding previously mentioned the study conducted by Brooks et al. (2022) where incel related tweets incremented in areas where there were skewed sex ratios and a reduced gender wage gap. This draws strong parallels with bare branches in Asia as they are unable to enter into marriage due to a lack of resources when there are few women to mate with due to skewed sex ratios.

Gender Wage Gap

Incels often highlight that their inability to find a romantic or sexual partner is due to the superficial preferences of women. Considering this claim, as well as drawing and expanding upon the findings from the previous subsection, one of the inquiries the present study seeks to understand is if, in fact, inceldom is related to an increase in the gender wage gap. In the United States differing factors have led to a general loss of blue collar jobs to the international market in the United States, as well as a trend of stagnant real wages that are unable to keep up with inflation, with the purchasing power of 2018 almost mirroring 1978's; meanwhile, those in the top tenth of the distribution have seen their real wages rise a cumulative 15,7% since 2002 (Desilver, 2018; Reeves, 2022). This is compounded by the effects of a 2:1 ratio of females accessing post-secondary education in higher numbers than their male counterparts. The actual ratio of professional degree attainment is even more skewed in favor of female acquisition due to a higher dropout rate for males once they are enrolled in institutions (Reeves, 2022).

Therefore, while there is still a gender wage gap that favors men in the United States, the earnings pyramid is distributed as follows: a small percentage of men occupy the top tier, with women increasingly occupying the middle tier and the largest tier at the bottom being filled by men (Reeves, 2022). According to Desilver,

Since 2002, usual weekly wages have risen 3% (in real terms) among workers in the lowest tenth of the earnings distribution and 4.3% among the lowest quarter [...] Sluggish and uneven wage growth has been cited as a key factor behind widening income inequality in the United States. A recent Pew Research Center report, based on an analysis of household income data from the Census Bureau, found that in 2016 Americans in the top tenth of the income distribution earned 8.7 times as much as Americans in the bottom tenth (\$109,578 versus \$12,523). In 1970, when the analysis period began, the top tenth earned 6.9 times as much as the bottom tenth (\$63,512 versus \$9,212). (2018, para. 11)

With a similar dynamic happening in Uganda, due to the slow blue collar labor market which men are tending to predominantly occupy, as women are increasingly accessing post-secondary education, and the persistence of hypergamy ideals, men tend to feel unable to fill the societal role that they believe is expected of them, leaving them feeling undervalued and frustrated. Many adopt an attitude towards high status women that distorts the reality of the mating discrepancies, labeling them undesirable as opposed to “unattainable” (Frye & Urbina, 2020).

Considering what research shows about behavioral gender norms remaining mostly rigid in the United States despite social status progress for women, much in the same way as has happened in Uganda, it seems that similar behavioral results are occurring among low status males in the US (Prentice & Carranza, 2002; Rumand & Glick, 2002; England, 2010; Charles & Grudsky, 2004; Knight and Brinton, 2017, as cited in Frye & Urbina, 2020). This may be one of the contributing factors to the rise of online male dominated communities that engage in violent discourse against women, such as incels.

A report by Pew Research Center studies the proportion of partnered versus unpartnered population in the United States and the resulting implications. In an analysis of a census conducted by the institution in 2019 it was found that in adults ages 25 to 54 38% were unpartnered, which is a large increase from 1990 where 29% shared the same status. In addition, it is mostly men who make up the unpartnered population, this result differs from the data collected 30 years ago where the sexes were evenly distributed in the category. The 2019 data shows that 39% of men were unpartnered versus 36% of women, whereas in 1990 there was only 29% unpartnered in each sex (Fry & Parker, 2021).

The negative effects of this reality may be reinforced by the conclusion that those who are partnered have higher levels of well-being than those who are unpartnered. Unpartnered men and women tend to have lower earnings, on average, are less likely to be employed or economically independent, and have lower levels of education. This could have implications for the mental and physical health of this portion of the population which could lead to an increased risk for the rest of society. While there is a high percentage of unpartnered women who should also be of concern for policy makers and social scientists, the risk will more than likely be on an individual level; whereas, due to what we understand about who commits violent crime, “cross-culturally, an overwhelming percentage of violent crime is perpetrated by young, unmarried, low-status males” (Hudson & den Boer, 2002, pp. 12-13), unpartnered males should be an important concern for security reasons. In accordance with this data, as concerns this study specifically, in the United States, males were responsible for 81% of all arrests for the committal of violent crime and around 63% of all arrests for property crime (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2011, as cited in University of Minnesota, 2015). Taking these findings into consideration, it is pertinent to study the gender wage gap and its role in incelism. That is to say, are incels part of the group of men being left behind economically in the neoliberal era? And, consequently, could a decrease in access to resources be hindering, in part, their ability to find romantic or sexual partners considering the social expectations placed on men by themselves and others because of the maintenance of rigid gender norms in the country.

Psychoanalysis as a framework for understanding Incel psychology and preventing harm to self and others

An explanation for this contradictoriness which incels demonstrate, i.e. women must be perfect but also not abiding by this as shown in their dating app usage (Sparks et al., 2024)

is through the analysis of the unconscious conflict(s) they are apparently experiencing. Freud's drive theory posits that inner conflict between the id, ego and superego is part of human experience. As different agencies within the structural model of the personality it can be understood that the id is the instinctual drive, the superego composes a person's introjection of societal expectations and norms, and the ego plays the role of mediator between these two parts (Eagle, 2017).

A possible way of understanding the discrepancy between what incels in the study done by Sparks et al. (2024) is that the id is seeking the object of desire, in this case affection from a woman which is demonstrated by the much wider range of user selection exhibited by this group versus the non-incel group. If the women selected through the app do not physically meet the standards set by the superego, then what could be presenting in this apparent discrepancy is internal conflict between these two agencies, the id and super ego. Presuming that incels have introjected certain ideals from a patriarchal/misogynist society, that women are objects, and that the incel, as man is owed sex with not just any woman but with Stacey's which is corroborated by the generalized expression on incel forums as well as the research conducted by Costello et al. (2024 as cited in Costello et al., 2025) where incels identified feminism as the principal antagonist for their condition. This coincides with much of the academic literature on incels (see table 1).

Feminism as believed causal mechanism	Resulting identity outcome	Academic Literature
The "sexual revolution" as the triggering social process of hypergamy and female selection of mates based on looks. As well as female sexual promiscuity.	Incels believe they are marginalized because feminism, through the sexual revolution, led to female promiscuity. This results in mate selection based on looks.	Brooks et al. (2022); Costello et al. (2024); Fowler (2022); Menzie (2022); Preston et al. (2021); Sparks et al. (2024); Ünnes (2020)
Feminism as the underlying reason behind the degradation of the patriarchal family and thus the elimination of man's role as economic provider.	No formal path to status and romantic or sexual partner.	Ging (2019); Lucy (2024); ; O'Malley et al. (2022); Price (2024); Rowland (2023); Scaptura & Boyle (2020); Thorburn (2023)
The system as a gynocentric establishment where institutions discriminate against men by favoring women. This includes the judicial system and its norms, education and public policy in general.	Men as an oppressed class of citizens.	Bengtsson Meuller (2024); Brzuszkiewicz (2020); Byerly (2020); Chan (2023); O'Malley & Helm (2023); Zimmerman (2024)
Critiques posited by feminism of masculinity are	There is no point in trying to not be an incel as women	Baele et al. (2021); Costello et al. (2025); Cottee (2021);

deemed to be weaponized in order to emasculate men.	have created a system that is rigged against men to subordinate them, making radicalization the only alternative.	Gosse et al. (2025); Halpin (2022); Regehr (2022); Witt (2020)
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What may be concluded psychoanalytically is that this argumentation apparently made by the critical superego is a neurotic defense to curtail desire, the object of desire (affection from women, their looks, age, sexual history being irrelevant to the id and exemplified in incels's dating app usage) feeling out of reach. Seeing that there is important anecdotal evidence of this on incel forums as well as quantitative data reported by Sparks et al. which is as follows,

incels reported matching with other users less than five percent of the time, one-sixth the rate reported by their non-incel counterparts. When incels did match with another user, only about one quarter responded to their initial message, less than half the rate of other males. (2024, p. 1008)

The ego, as understood in psychoanalytic theory, is responsible for mediating between the demands and desires of the id and superego. If the subject presents with a deficient ego that has difficulty in fulfilling its function, we see a psychical structure prone to imbalances, skewing too far towards the pleasure-seeking id or to the critical superego (Eagle, 2017), and can explain the high levels of mental health issues presented by incels. Essentially the ego is overwhelmed by these other agencies and finds trouble mediating these conflicts in rational and socially appropriate ways, an example may be excessive violence expressed towards society, women in general, chads but also towards themselves in the case of incels.

This objectification of Self and Others is a perverse mode of relating. This is an attempt to control a feared subjectivity of the other or of the Self (Celenza, 2013). Incels do not see themselves as fitting the stereotypical masculine gender ideal, their rigid view of what constitutes maleness may lead them to occupy similar modes of relating to Self that afflict women who have internalized that their phallic power is to be feared. This fear of one's own subjectivity, that one desires too intensely, too uncontrollably is turned on the Self, the aggression, sometimes murderous, felt when these desires and needs are felt to be unmet can be expressed in terms of self-harm such as suicidality, depression, negative self image and fetishizing of the body (Celenza, 2013).

Conclusion

This study, through its review of the academic literature on incels, found that inceldom appears to be triggered by feminism. When asked, in Costello et al. (2025), incels underscored that the biggest enemy to their community were feminists, this corroborates qualitative data collected by other studies on incel forums (see table 1). However, this is the self-reported conscious cause that incels identify which contrasts with what this study determined to be the more accurate, structural, as well as individual underlying causes of inceldom. As with bare branches in Asia as well as medieval Portugal, structural and cultural restraints on mating can be understood to lead to a large proportion of unpartnered low status males within a society. What is interesting about bare branches is that while proximate causes of male surplus differ from case to case the structural consequences are consistent. In the cases of Asian bare branches and Western incels, both groups consist of low-status young men excluded from romantic or sexual

relationships due to the maintenance of rigid gender roles that place hypergamic pressures on dating market dynamics based on resource scarcity. This leaves these groups of marginalized men to seek status through similar mechanisms—these men congregate, in the Asian cases these men do so in person, whereas incels come together on online forums— they then incite one another to commit acts of escalating risky and violent behavior as a means of achieving internal prestige within the group. Hudson and den Boer (2002) also determined that bare branches can form for diverse reasons. In medieval Portugal Male offspring preference led to an adult sex ratio of 112:100 creating low and high-status bare branches as only first-born sons could inherit family wealth. The outcomes were the same, political instability at home as high-status bare branches commandeered armies of low-status bare branches to back usurpers and in times of relative peace governments would pursue warfare and colonization abroad (North of Africa) to avoid the political upheaval that they caused domestically. This corresponds with the findings of the current study in response to the initial inquiry it posed, bare branches can manifest in different ways and for different reasons that correspond to the political, cultural and economic contexts they belong to, but it appears that the underlying cause is the lack of resources needed to meet societal expectations necessary for mating.

In the case of the incel phenomenon this study found that, Title IX saw an increase in women in higher education and achieving more degrees than their male counterparts, which saw a rise in their wages and coincided with the deterioration of the blue collar labor sector framed within a neoliberal context, both through a reduction of jobs that were offshored to more cost efficient markets and the stagnation of real wages compared to inflation. Essentially, leading to a reduction in the gender wage gap but the continuation of rigid gender roles among many in the country that leaves a reduced margin for maneuvering the mating market. This is coupled with a high level of self-reported mental health struggles and personality traits unfavorable in a social setting that demands heightened tact in order to connect with others. This is corroborated by the demographic findings of Costello et al. (2025) that showed that incel participants were single and childless and tended to not have university education, lived with their parents and were mostly middle to lower class. If the previous results are considered in conjunction with what Brooks et al. (2022) found, that in the United States, in the areas where the sex ratio was skewed and the gender wage gap was reduced there was a higher percentage of incel related tweets, it is worth considering what the current study proposes. Therefore, to understand the incel phenomenon it is necessary to consider the previously mentioned findings in conjunction with one another in the context of the process tracing conducted by the present study. In doing so, it concludes that it becomes increasingly difficult to ignore the striking parallels between incels and other cases of bare branches. Consequently, it is worth considering them as a Western manifestation of this phenomenon.

It is easy for members of this community to assume that their troubles correspond to surface level issues like the women that do not accept their advances because of their looks but what this study reveals is a more complex phenomena that has, in some occasions, ended in real world violence and a continuous stream of online indirect violence to Self and to women. In a time of increasing authoritarianism in the United States, it is advisable that further research study the relationship between incels, violence in society and rising levels of authoritarianism in the U.S as well as the increase of bellicosity in its foreign policy.

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