

## How 'Incel' Got Hijacked

By BEN ZIMMER May 08, 2018

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What started as an empathetic term became a rallying point for violent men. Here's what the word's coiner wants to do about it.



A man writes a message at a memorial near the site of the deadly van attack, April 24, 2018, in Toronto. | Geoff Robins/Getty Images

Ever since a man killed 10 people by plowing a van through a busy sidewalk in Toronto last month, there has been endless commentary about a word that he used to identify himself in a Facebook post just before the attack: “incel,” short for “involuntary celibate.”

[In the post](#), now deleted, Alek Minassian announced that “the Incel Rebellion has already begun,” and praised another self-identified incel: Elliot Rodger, who killed six and wounded 13 in a shooting spree in Isla Vista, California, in 2014. Minassian, like Rodger, seemed to blame his violent act on sexual rejection by women, linking himself to a misogynistic culture of “incels,” all male, that has sprung up online. On message boards and in chat rooms, aggrieved men have worn the “incel” badge to justify a sense of victimhood at the hands of women who they feel have spurned them.

Like many new words, “incel” provides a convenient shorthand for a group that had barely been thought of as a group at all, and a lightning rod for people’s opinions about it. After the *New York Times*’ Ross Douthat wrote a column suggesting that the “unhappiness of incels” might eventually lead to a public debate on the distribution of sex, the internet boiled over with anger at, and about, incels.

(“Someone Please Tell the Times that Incels are Terrorists,” ran [one headline](#) in the Village Voice.)

Whether incels are all dangerous, or some just “depressed and despairing,” as Douthat put it, what’s certain is that they didn’t invent the word: They took it over. It has roots in online use going back more than 20 years, and, as is often the case with hateful words, began its life in a harmless fashion. It was coined in the late 1990s by a Canadian woman named Alana (she asked that her last name not be used in this story) when she was volunteering for a not-for-profit internet provider based in Ottawa after she graduated from Carleton University. In May 1997, she posted in a local Usenet newsgroup: “If you have had life-long difficulty starting dating or forming relationships, you might like to check out my new web page.” She provided a link to a personal site that she titled, “Alana’s Involuntary Celibacy Project.”

On the site, [early versions](#) of which are preserved on the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine, Alana revealed, “I don’t really like the term ‘involuntary celibacy,’ but haven’t found a good alternative either.” While she kicked around [other possible terms](#) (like “perpetually single” or “dating-shy”), none of them seemed to do the trick. In October 1997, she announced on Usenet that she had started a mailing list devoted to involuntary celibacy. As was typical of electronic mailing lists of the day, she gave it an abbreviated name: “INVCEL.”

Alana told me that she and the other mailing list participants began using “invcel” as a shorthand term for either “involuntary celibacy” or “involuntary celibate,” before it became clear that they needed something that was easier to pronounce. One participant suggested removing the “v,” and “incel” was born.

On a version of Alana’s website [archived from May 1999](#), it was clear that incel had taken over in the small community, though it still required clarification. “Incel is an invented term, so there is no official definition,” she explained on the site. She distinguished “two distinct, though related, categories: single and married incels,” and tackled such questions as, “If a single incel starts dating, are they a former incel?”

The appeal of the term, Alana recalls, was that it seemed neutral and nonjudgmental. “The concept of being a lonely virgin is not a nice identity,” she said. “Finding a more friendly term helped people say, ‘Hey, I belong to a group. I’m not alone.’ And by belonging to a group, people can help each other.”

After a few years, Alana moved on from the community she created and she passed off much of her online content to [a new site](#) maintained by someone she did not know. It was only in 2014, when the Isla Vista killings were in the news, that she realized what had happened to the word incel over the years. It had become hijacked by people like the killer, Rodger, who [used it on message boards](#) to justify hatred of women based on being sexually rejected. Whereas the 1990s incarnation of the term had been inclusive regardless of gender and sexuality, the new incel culture was rigidly patrolled by the indignant young men typifying the so-called manosphere.

As incel entered [the lingo of the manosphere](#), it spawned many variations on the theme. Not only is there “marcel” for “married celibate” (a term that had been explored by Alana’s old mailing list), there is also “nearcel” (“nearly celibate”), “noncel” (“non-celibate”), “volcel” (“voluntary celibate”) and “hicel” (“high-standards celibate”—not to be confused with “heightcel,” a man whose lack of height renders him an incel).

Since the Toronto attack has exposed the noxious incel subculture yet again, many commentators have focused on what the word represents to the men who identify with it. Alana, for her part, thinks it’s time for the conversation to move on. In response to the attack and the renewed focus on incels (including [media attention](#) to her role in creating the word), she has started a new site, [Love Not Anger](#), subtitled “Beyond Involuntary Celibacy.” She describes it as “a project to research how lonely people might find respectful love, instead of being stuck in anger.” The site’s name comes from a quotation from the Canadian politician Jack Layton, who led the New Democratic Party until his death in 2011: “Love is better than anger. Hope is better than fear. Optimism is better than despair.”

Not many people get to coin a word, and you might imagine Alana would want to salvage incel, but she says she has no interest in trying to rescue a term now so firmly associated with “a hateful men’s movement.” “The search for love is still there,” she says. “There are lots of people who are lonely, having trouble with dating, and there’s no friendly, neutral word for people who are lonely for love in that way.” Incel might have served that purpose 20 years ago, but it is now beyond reclamation. While she doesn’t yet have a replacement for it, Alana hopes that a new term will emerge from those who collaborate on the Love Not Anger project.

Alana acknowledges, however, that any new term could also be overtaken by unwanted connotations. She likened the terminological struggle to the way that “handicapped” replaced older words like “lame” or “crippled,” but then “handicapped” was seen as too pejorative and was replaced by “disabled,” which in turn may be seen as too negative. (The cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker labels this phenomenon the “[euphemism treadmill](#).”) Words can accrue associative power whether we like it or not—and even the coiner of a term may have no control over the direction it takes as it circulates in the world.

*Ben Zimmer is the language columnist for the Wall Street Journal.*

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