



College Students' Attitudes Towards Fringe Beliefs and Identities

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Abstract

One hundred and seventeen participants completed questionnaire about fringe beliefs/identities (e.g. Incels, Reptilians). Many participants were aware of these believers but few opined they were mentally ill and/or dangerous. The exception was for Incels. Of those knowledgeable about Incels, 69% opined they "posed a threat." Unexpectedly, only 59% of participants disagreed with the statement that the US government orchestrated, or allowed, 9/11 to happen.

Introduction

- The internet and social media allows individuals with odd and/or eccentric ideas to find validation for their beliefs.
- Fringe groups include Sovereign Citizens, Incels, Reptilians, Flat Earthers and "Targeted Individuals."
- **Sovereign citizens** challenge the legitimacy of the government (Paradis, et al. 2018, Parker, 2014).
- **"Targeted individuals"** believe there are organized groups tracking them.
- **"Incels"** (Involuntary Celibates) are a notable online presence and have been violent towards women.
- **Reptilians** believe that aliens have taken human forms.
- **Flat Earthers** assert the earth is flat and governments are hiding this.
- There is little research on how individuals understand these various fringe beliefs/identities.
- This study examined college students' understanding of and attitudes towards these individuals.

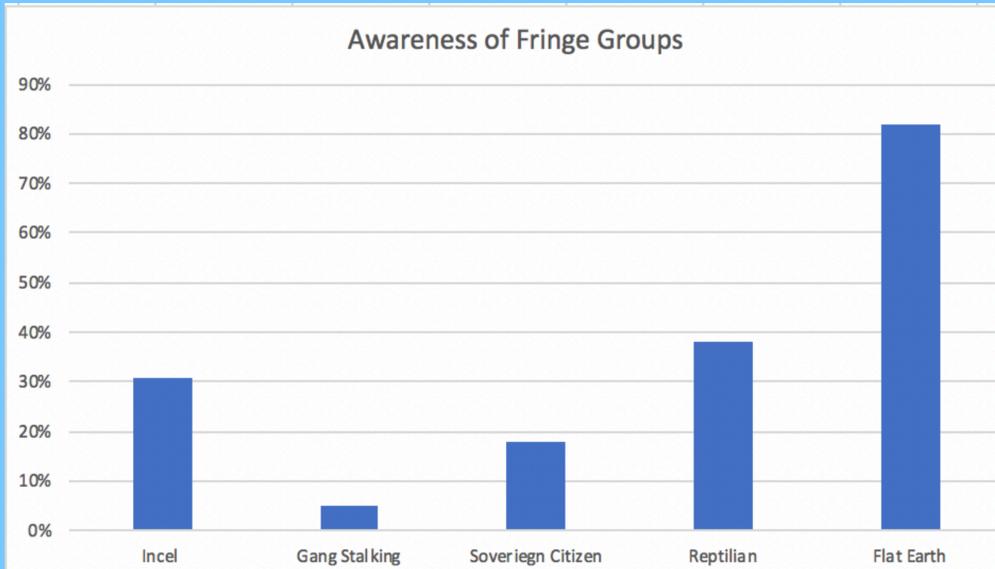
Method & Participants

• **Method:**
Authors created a self-report questionnaire assessing research participants' awareness of and understanding of fringe beliefs/identities.

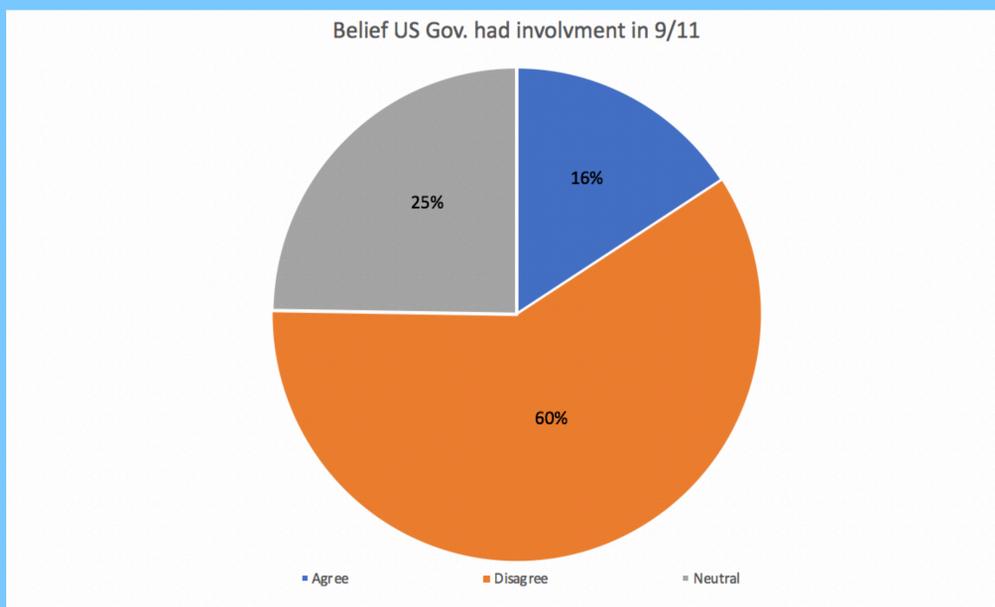
Additional questions were based on a 5-point Likert scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."

- **Participants:**
 - 117 college students
 - Mean age- 20 (range 18-59)
 - Gender: Male-15%, Females-83%, Other-3%
 - Ethnicity: White-74%, African American-5%, Latinx-8%, Asian- 2%, Other 11%

Results



Compared to females, male participants were significantly more likely to report awareness of Gang Stalking, $X^2(1, N=111)=5.883, p=.015$.



Results

Attitudes Towards Fringe Groups

Of those aware of	N	Percentiles
Incels	36	
Agree Incels "pose a treat"		69%
Agree Incels are "mentally ill"		25%
Agree Incels are "unfairly criticized"		6%
Gang Stalking	6	
Agree "It is a real event"		80%
Agree "US gov. is hiding it"		80%
Agree believers are "mentally ill"		40%
Flat Earthers	93	
Agree believers "pose a threat"		3%
Agree believers are "mentally ill"		6%
Reptilians	44	
Agree reptilians "exist"		2%
Agree reptilians can "imitate humans"		5%
Agree reptilians aim to "gain power"		5%
Agree members "pose a threat"		7%
Agree members are "mentally ill"		14%
Sovereign Citizens	21	
Agree sovereign citizens "pose a threat"		5%
Agree sovereign citizens are "mentally ill"		2%
Agree sovereign citizens are "unfairly targeted by US gov"		25%

*Percentages are rounded for those answering each question

Discussion

- Many participants agreed with the statement, "The US government orchestrated 9/11 or allowed it to happen." This was unexpected, though consistent with previous research that many people share this same opinion (Flynn, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2017).
- While few participants had heard of Gang Stalking, many were aware of Incels, Reptilians, and Flat Earthers.
- It is understandable that participants would be aware of Incels and view these individuals as potentially dangerous.
- There have been high profile cases of violent men who identified as Incels (e.g Scott Beierle, 2018).
- Having some familiarity with the term "Flat Earthers" is understandable, since the name is self explanatory and a documentary about them was released in 2018 (Netflix "Behind the Curve").
- It was surprising that few were aware of Sovereign Citizens. They were likely unaware that the FBI had named them the number one domestic threat to the United States.
- Future research could also help inform why so many participants were aware of Reptilians and why the male participants, were more aware of Gang Stalking.