

**Les Back 00:00**

Hello, and welcome to Recovering Community, a podcast about community, what it means, how it's formed, and how it can be rebuilt. I'm Les back, and I'm head of sociology at the University of Glasgow. And this podcast is all about what it means to think about doing research with communities, on the public issues that affect them most deeply in their homes. In this edition of the podcast, we want to ask what it does to a person or indeed a whole community when the sanctuary of home is lost. To be homeless is more than not having a roof over your head. It's also about a denial of being, a person out of place to be looked away from to ignore, and to not make eye contact with them. As you pass busily through Glasgow Central Station.

The number of people living precariously in the city is increasing. A recent article in the Glasgow Herald says they have doubled recently. This is a story of a deep crisis, not only in housing, but it also reveals the symbiotic relationship between social inequalities, homelessness, violence, and the drug economy. And it's a story that many people in organisations are trying to rewrite. One of them is Glasgow City Council, who have been putting up rough sleepers and vulnerable people, or RSVPs in a number of city center hotels for a few years now. For an overstretched local authority struggling to meet demand. This has been a controversial and troubled solution to a very complicated issue.

There are some public commentators who love to stir up hatred towards people who they see as living a luxury benefit lifestyle in tax funded hotels. But the truth is, people housed in these places are without specialist support and left to go it alone, vulnerable to violence and substance misuse. Stories of deaths in these hotels are all too easy to find on local news websites. In November 2022, a freedom of information request showed that 23 people had died in three Glasgow homeless hotels since March 2020. But there are personal tragedies beyond these headlines. Another organisation working in this field is the Simon Community Scotland, a charity providing information, advice, care, support, and accommodation to people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

The Simon community has a wealth of expertise and lived experience within its team of staff and volunteers. One of them is Jim Thompson, who at the time of our interview was the coordinator of we see you, a project run from the Simon Community's access hub in the city center. Jim and the Simon Community partnered with my colleague Susan Batchelor and Caitlin Gormley, as part of a major research project on repeat violence in Scotland. It's a piece of work that's urgently important, and I wanted to understand it deeply. So instead of a day at my desk, I got off the train at Central Station and met up with Susan, a senior lecturer in sociology, and Caitlin, a lecturer in criminology, who are based in the Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research. Morning Caitlin, and Susan. Doing good, very good. Thank you. Okay, so we're off to the Simon Community.

**Susan Batchelor 03:52**

Yes. So this is one of the sites where we engaged with stakeholders to talk about the emergent findings of our recent research, which is funded by the Scottish Government looking at experiences of repeat violence in Scotland.

**Les Back 04:08**

So you did the research with the with the community here in Glasgow, but you were in conversation with and in dialogue with people in a way toward trying out the findings and, and getting a sense of what, how those ideas resonated with them. Is that right?

**Caitlin Gormley** 04:24

Yeah, exactly. Like this is one of the communities one of the organisations that would be most affected by the research. So it was really important for us to bring the research to them and to other organisations like that once we'd finished the report once we'd finished the research.

**Les Back** 04:37

Well, I'm looking forward to meeting people involved in the in the community and learning more about this.

**Caitlin Gormley** 04:42

I think there's something really important for you to meet here at the Simon Community. Let's go inside.

**Les Back** 04:47

Jim, good to meet you. I'm Les Pleased to meet you. So here we are at Simon Community.

**Jim Thomson** 04:54

This is the access hub. This is where it all happened.

**Les Back** 04:56

Yeah, it's a beautiful place. Yeah it's not what I imagined at all you know?

**Jim Thomson** 05:03

They designed it with colours so people feel relaxed and welcome.

**Les Back** 05:10

It's a very welcoming sort of place.

**Jim Thomson** 05:12

Well it's nice, we got training rooms we've got treatment rooms, we've got counselling rooms. We've got a vet room, Trusty Paws room, we've also got a shower. If anybody comes and they need a shower. Yeah, definitely. The access hub is a service like no other, where people come and they are welcome. No criteria needs to be met to come in through the doors. Everybody's welcome. No matter what condition you're in people will be looked after, and they'll be cared for.

**Les Back** 05:45

Really looking forward to finding out more, Jim about the work you do here so maybe we could go and have a sit down and and talk.

**Jim Thomson** 05:52

Definitely, come through here.

**Les Back** 05:56

Once we were settled with a cup of tea, I asked Jim to tell me more about his work with We See You

**Jim Thomson** 06:01

We're a service, an out of hours service, we open the doors at six in the evening now. And we open until nine o'clock. We provide harm reduction. Along with psychosocial interventions, we do group work we've got a drama group, we've got a walking group, we have a movie day, we're open seven days a week. The guys who come through the door are predominantly people who use drugs or substances of one sort or other, and they're mostly homeless men and women who stay in the city centre in hotels

**Les Back** 06:36

Can you just tell us a little bit about the sort of story of the growth of homelessness in the city centre and particularly the sort of the way in which the city's been reacting to that to the emergence of large numbers of homeless people in the city centre?

**Jim Thomson** 06:53

I'm sure that the numbers that they were over 700 people in homeless accommodation in Glasgow City, so that'll tell you what the issues we're dealing with

**Les Back** 07:06

And those people they've lost their homes, they've they've come to the city centre they're from all over is that right?

**Jim Thomson** 07:13

Yeah, yeah definitely. And as I say, the majority of folk that I work with have got issues with addiction, substance use alcohol drugs. Along with that comes mental health issues. So people have either left their home or they've not really had a home, people that have come through the care system, people that have for many, many years have had addiction issues. Obviously, I'm an addict myself. I'm in recovery for quite a long time. And I didn't choose to use drugs because I wanted to party or I wanted to do anything other than non stop feeling this stuff that I felt. So I can identify with... even today, people will come through the door today and they'll talk to me. And I can take myself date back to when I felt like that. And it's not great. Know what I mean? Because we've not got a lot to offer these guys. You just need to walk through the streets of Glasgow City Centre and you can see the trauma that's written over the guy's faces, it's easily easily visible.

**Les Back** 08:27

Can I just tell us a little bit about you know, giving people a place to sleep and board. How did we arrived at this point and I just wanted to ask you about the relationship between the reaction to the pandemic COVID 19 pandemic and how we've arrived at this point.

**Jim Thomson** 08:47

We had loads and loads of rough sleepers. I'm not too sure on the figure, but we had lots of rough sleepers just pre-pandemic, there were loads of people on the streets. You just had to walk through the

city centre and you would see them in doorways. Then COVID came about and we had to react to that. Glasgow City Council they sourced, well the Simon Community were the first organisation to do it. They took over the Ibis up in West Regent Street I'm sure that was, they took people from the streets directly into that. And they ran that quite successfully. Until, they had to, I don't know whatever happened, the council had sourced other hotels and people were housed in there. But the Simon Community, whilst they were doing it, they were staffed 24/7.

So the men and women in it were supported, so they had the intensive outreach support team and the street team who were going out, supporting people from the streets into this hote. When that closed the council used other hotels; the Rennie MacIntoch, the Alexander Thompson, the St Enoch. Hotels outwith the city centre, the Queen's Park, the Copland Road Hotel. But there were loads and loads of hotels that are being used. But the problem with these hotels, they were just to get people off the street. But the problem with them is they've not got any support staff in them. So the people who are staying in them are alone, and there is nothing worse than being alone and yourself. And you just want somebody to talk to when you get the urge to go and reach out for support and nobody's there. The feeling isn't very nice,

**Les Back** 10:37

So the intention to give people a bed, but actually ends up making people more isolated.

**Jim Thomson** 10:43

Definitely.

**Les Back** 10:43

What are the consequences of that? Jim, what do you think results from that? This, putting people in hotels? Without support? Where does that lead?

**Jim Thomson** 10:55

Well, people will use more drugs for a start, just to cope. And along with using more drugs, people will put theirself at a higher risk of overdose. We've seen that, the figures for drug related deaths in these hotels, if they had been in appropriate accommodation, supported, they would be alive today. Whether we like it or not. Not many people are talking about it but I was one of those guys and I can't hide away from my values. a carnie. I can't no be me, because it's just not right

**Les Back** 11:30

I really want to come back to the idea of community because it feels like a lot of what you're trying to do is to build recovery. because our podcast is called Recovering Community. And in a way it takes on another kind of meaning in the story that you're sharing with us about recovery, personal recovery, but also, you know, taking back and making again, and maybe we could come back to that. But I just wanted to bring Caitlin and Susan in and the link between what Jim's describing and violence.

**Susan Batchelor** 12:02

So we've done a project where we went to various places across Scotland, and one of the big themes that emerged was the link between housing and violence within those those communities. And also

when we spoke to people and asked them to describe the features of their communities, another important link was with the drug economy. That was something that they brought up themselves and unprompted.

So the kind of guys that Jim works with experience, violence, from drug dealers, in terms of threats and non payment of, of drug debts, they sometimes experience violence from one another, as they are trying to seek funds for drug use. And they also experience violence from other people in the community who identify them as vulnerable, and target them and that and that often leads to them having their homes taken over or they're they're leaving the community. And then they end up in hostels, or hotels in the city centre, where they're alone and vulnerable, and maybe have come from other parts of Scotland and don't have connections here.

And these are men and women that don't feel that they can access support services. So they really are on their own, and the violence that they experience is every day. And it compounds the trauma, and the failures of the state that they've experienced throughout their lives to support them.

**Caitlin Gormley 13:31**

Yeah, I think there's also another form of violence going on there, where people are, they're being left to their own devices, they're being left behind by the state, they're living in conditions that are less than ideal. Like these are very dangerous, and sometimes unsanitary conditions. And you know, not having the support services or the support staff on site, you're left with the lower levels of security, and people feeling extremely unsafe, in those places where there is the threat of violence, but there also is actual violence happening in those spaces or nearby.

Alongside that there's the threat of eviction, at any given point, there's the threat of being moved to another place in the city that you don't know, there's a violence in that and having to constantly be ready to move, everything that you have. There's an unfairness to that, that we heard from the people we spoke to for many reasons, but often it was that it was often people that were on the receiving end of violence that were being moved, they were told that it was for their protection, and that that kind of unfairness followed people around. It was a feature of the relationship or lack of relationship that they had with the people that were putting them into these places.

**Les Back 14:39**

So often, the judgments that are made about people are made individually aren't they, and people are blamed individually. But what you're describing is a different way of understanding how we arrived at this position. And I just wondered if we could talk a little bit about how to understand you know, the shocking figures that you're telling us Jim about the number of people dying in hotels, preventable deaths as you say. But if we try and understand this within a broader scale beyond individual, you know, individual tragedies or individual responsibility, what would that look like?

**Jim Thomson 15:13**

I don't understand it at all. I'm a boy who didn't have much education in his life, but I've been screaming from the rooftops for years about the solution to this. We need more accommodation that provides people the tools to deal with you know their adverse childhood experiences that they went through. Or

whatever kind of issues they've got to be honest and take them through a kinda an apprenticeship for life, learn them how to live, know... then take them from the these facilities and take them in and put them in house where they've got the tools to to start living. But people aren't living, you just need to stand in the foyer there.

And you'll see the suffering day in, day out. And then what you're seeing, they're put into a hotels, and they're along. And for the simplest wee thing... if somebody happens to maybe overdose and gets took up to the hospital and you get discharged from the hospital in the morning, they're homeless again, their room has been closed. So then they're getting took from that place where they maybe been quite comfortable, and they're put into somewhere on the other side of the city, because we're not dealing with the issue. We're warehouseing people. As I say there are over 700 people in homeless accommodation in Glasgow city, people aren't just going to start moving back in with their mum and dad, relationships aren't just going to rekindle overnight, and men and women are gonna go back to domestic abuse that they fled. Know what I mean? Things aren't gonna just get fixed, like that

**Caitlin Gormley 17:04**

That suffering is being concentrated in these areas. And then there's obviously the those kind of unintended consequences of housing people in a really compact space within a city. They're being exposed in a way that they're they're made more vulnerable in those circumstances. So then that that kind of drug market, and that drug economy is thriving in those spaces and the violence that comes with that that has been mentioned, then that's all there in that space.

**Les Back 17:32**

Could you just tell us a little bit about how those patterns in the drug economy and also of use are changing in this kind of, in this situation, you know, that about warehousing people is such a powerful way of putting your finger on what's going on.

**Jim Thomson 17:47**

If you're putting hundreds and hundreds of people in a square mile in the city centre, and these people use drugs, along with that, you're gonna get people who sell drugs, people who perpetrate violence, people who exploit people, vulnerable people, people who sell sex, people who buy sex. So when you think of the cost for the NHS in most statutory services, criminal justice everything, it would be more cost effective, just putting facilities in place that they can kind of to support people. Just imagine it five of these hotels, over the past five years, just five hotels have made 25 million! 25 million pounds on housing benefit. If they put up money into building treatment centres and putting staff in place, experienced staff to deal with the people that they're houseing. It's a no brainer, really. To support that apprenticeship in life we talked about. Susan can I aske you about how we understand what we're, we're thinking about together.

**Susan Batchelor 19:09**

One of the advantages of the approach that we took to doing this study was basing it in particular communities. And that allowed Caitlin and I to understand the features of those communities, and not just focus on the individuals that were experiencing violence. And so some of the structural features included sort of generational poverty, and lack of investment in sort of local employment sector,

disinvestment of services, both very recently in terms of COVID, and the sort of more recent economic crisis, but also longer term, particular concerns about the shutting down of youth centers and community centers.

And all this contributing to a sense of the people that live there that they didn't matter, that they don't count, and that nobody's coming to help. In that context, where you have a more resistant attitude towards the state, because your interactions with them are negative, you understandably sort of develop a culture of self reliance where people look out for one another, and don't go and report victimisation, or harm to the police, they try and deal with it themselves. And so we were looking at some of those structural features of the community, as well as some of the cultural features. And within that masculinity was a particular issue that was important in relation to violence. So both in terms of that sense of sorting things out yourself, being able to stand up for yourself, but but those structural features are important to understand in terms of life course, as well as community. And so the people that we spoke to that experience, repeat violence, experienced violence, growing up in the family home, sometimes very, very serious violence and abuse within the family, violence and abuse within the community.

And when the state has attempted to respond to that, for example through the education, whether that's mainstream education, or special education provision, it's failed, its failed people. And it's often in those institutional contexts where people experience further violence, and develop violent coping mechanisms, and also turn to drug and alcohol use, to deal with the trauma that they've experienced and the violence that's ongoing. And that isn't dealt with by the system. And so, many of the people that we interviewed have a sort of a pattern where that violence starts in the home, they are excluded from school mainstream educational provision, they perhaps go into the looked after sector, young offenders, institutes and prisons, which are very violent places, and they teach this culture of standing up for yourself, not taking any disrespect, and and also are often the places where people are introduced to drugs as a means of coping.

So in terms of your previous question about individual and wider factors, this is not about individual people making lifestyle choices. It's about a failure of state systems to adequately support the people that are most vulnerable within our society. And people that are often not seen as deserving of support and therefore don't see themselves as deserving. And feel that there is no safe space, there's no safe space at home, in the community. And that's why places like the access hub are really important, because it's one of the few safe spaces that are available for people to come to.

**Les Back** 22:39

So the violence has structural features. And it has every day, cultural dimensions as well, but we can't really make sense of it in individual terms at all.

**Susan Batchelor** 22:50

I believe that it's important to understand it in the sense of somebody's individual life story, but but you need to understand the context in which that life story plays out. And that's not about the decisions or the experiences that one individual, and there are social patterns. So you know, it's it's people from

particular communities in Scotland, that end up in the criminal justice system and end up homeless and those are the communities that we see the highest levels of disinvestment

**Caitlin Gormley** 23:20

The experiences that people are having are in violence, but in especially around repeat violence, they're not isolated incidents. They're interrelated all through the life course. And, and it follows people around in their lives. But quite often, the people that are experiencing the most repeat violence are the ones that are the least likely to report it, they're the least likely to seek support, or feel that support is there for them.

Also, that the violence is not the biggest issue that they're dealing with at that moment. It's the threat of losing your house or being homeless or moving to another city or another part of a city that you're unfamiliar with, and all of the fear that comes with that. It's that kind of unsettled nature, that that comes with that territory. There are the consequences, the direct consequences of experience and different forms of violence that people have told us about. But there's also the kind of indirect effects that people talked about as well.

And that's the fear that people have walking down the street, the fear that something is going to happen to them. And living in that condition is exhausting. It's stressful, and it's there all the time for people. And they're, they're constantly just ready for something like that to happen again. And that was that was something that came up a lot that it was there all the time, it was part of their life

**Susan Batchelor** 24:34

That was often described to us in terms of a sort of sense of hyper alertness or always being on sort of wing mirror on, and if you have an experience of being victimised in that way, you're anxious all the time. And a way to deal with that anxiety is to take substances. So that's another example of that intimate relationship between experiences of violence and engaging in substance use as a means of coping with that.

**Jim Thomson** 25:03

I remembered being in...the last homeless accommodation I was in was the Wellgrove Hotel. The room was smaller than a prison cell, the toilets were outside, the showers were outside, and I went into McDonald's and closed the door and get cleaned, because I was too anxious to win any places and shower. Listening to you Jim, you know, it makes me think recovery needs community in a way. That's partly what all of the things that you're doing and are developing seem to be in a service of It's, what we need, but it's very, very difficult to do it. And this environment, so you have got guys for a few hours. And you can do so much with them. But then you're sending them back to these environments, you're sending them back to their hotel room where they're going to be alone. So it's difficult. So the first thing in the morning when you do get up, and somebody offers you a handful of drugs, and a handful of pills, you take them. So when you've got later on in the day, you're no really in any condition to take part, take part in life, when that's what the guys are, they're crying out to do. But so many people are trying to take away their pain and the only way to do is with using more drugs. We've not really got the capacity to work miracles. And sometimes that's what we need.



**Susan Batchelor 26:38**

Just the work that Jim is doing with the We See You Group really takes forward the recommendations from the research. And those are that you can't prevent violence by a criminal justice response, that you need a sort of a multi sectoral approach that looks at people where they are in their lives and brings different services together. And as Jim says, the access hub is able to do some, some of that, but the lack of funding is really the issue that he's struggling with with the We See You group.

But what he is addressing is something that a lot of our participants said was important, was engaging with grassroots communities that are staffed by people with lived experience that they can relate to, but that also have the skills and the experience to be able to deal with violence, when it may be an issue, so that people can relate to, but also people like Jim that have lived experience are really important role models for people that are wanting to start the recovery journey because they can see a positive destination. So that's also really important for them. So off their own initiative the We See You group are sort of trying to adopt that, that model and you know, do something themselves, but they can't do it on their own, they need to be supported by a wider range of services.

**Les Back 27:57**

So we need to sort of foster communities of recovery really

**Susan Batchelor 28:01**

Absolutely and that is something that, you know, it's not Caitlin and I's idea that, you know, that is what participants told us time and time and time again. And you know, the value of a recovery community of having people that will just sit there with you on the journey that have that experience, that don't judge you is absolutely important and there are different types of community but that sort of shared experience, but also a shared destination is really important.

**Jim Thomson 28:30**

It's very difficult to get people into any kind of treatment centre or detox centre where they get to a place where they feel as if I'm ready to go and live, I'm ready to deal with these feelings that I'm feeling without having to use drugs. And put my life at risk, because the way people feel, they're willing to risk their life. So they don't feel it. The risk of death is better than the risk of living, do you know what I mean?

**Les Back 28:58**

Jim, in a way your story has been about losing a sense of community or having to leave a community but it feels like what you're doing here is building a community

**Jim Thomson 29:10**

Well I'm trying. For years and years and years, I did isolate in my own community. I ostracised myself from them. I didn't want to take part in it because I used drugs, because I didn't feel worthy. I had failed not only my family, my children, I'd failed everybody, I failed myself most of all, so I kinda left the community behind. And that's why, when I went into homeless accommodation I didn't feel, to be honest, anything, because I just took drugs to stop feeling. Then my mother died. When my mother died, the drugs stopped working. I felt a pain that drugs wouldn't take away. So, there were only two

things that I could do. I could either die or get well, so I went and I managed to get into the Drug Crisis Centre, and that's when I made a decision not to take drugs anymore.

For me, and as much as my life was quite messed up, I had to learn how to live again. I had to learn how to pay bills, I had to learn how to clean, I had to learn how to shower, I had to learn how to do washings, I had to learn everything. And I had to get taken away from society to do that. I went to rehab, I was in a treatment center for six months. And when I came out of the rehabilitation centre, I started volunteering with the Simon Community. And I found a purpose, because I've seen people with nothing, no sense of belonging, like they were coming to us for clean socks or a cup of tea, just to feel as though somebody was there.

But when we got the We See You project it was like a dream come true. Because I thought we will be able to build that community. But to go beyond that, to have a facility, a stand alone service, that's not just for 3 hours a night, I believe if we had that, with proper staff, with my staff team, we could perform miracles. I mean, because people don't want to be sick, people are sick of being sick, but they don't know any other way.

#### **Les Back 31:29**

Making home is not only about a physical everyday inhabitation. It involves a reckoning with the world as it is, but also how we would like it to be. It's an existential experience. To be denied access to a home is also to be denied a capacity to learn how to live, or as Jim says, an apprenticeship in life itself. The writer and critic John Berger described this as a place from which the world could be founded. Where am I? Where do I belong? And who do I want to be? These questions are being asked on every street corner in every community, every day.

Thank you for listening to this episode of Recovering Community. I'm Les back and I wanted to say a huge thank you to Jim Thomson, Susan Batchelor and Caitlin Gormley for such an insightful and generous conversation. You can find out more about Susan and Caitlin's report on repeat violence in Scotland, and the work of the Simon Community Scotland online. And I'll leave a link in the show notes.

I really hope you're enjoying this series of Recovering Community. It makes a huge difference if you subscribe, and share. For our last episode of this season, I'm in Sheffield, asking how communities think about heritage in relation to their city.

#### **Aisha 33:04**

The funny thing, when I was in Kenya, my dad used to always tell me "you see these spoons. They're from England. You see this fork from England, and they're durable and they're nice and they're very good stuff" it's like he was introducing me to Sheffield unconsciously, and when I came here it's like wow, this is the city my dad was talking about.

#### **Les Back 33:30**

Thanks to the staff in the School of Social and Political Sciences and the College of Social Sciences who helped with this project. Recovering Community is produced by Freya Hellier