



**Beyond Disproportionality: Relational
Collapse as a Systemic Signal**

People, Places, Things



Being In Relationship with Each Other is Critical

Relational Collapse: A systemic failure that occurs when sociotechnical systems—made of people, institutions, technologies, and norms—lose the capacity to sustain meaningful relationships, eroding trust, accountability, and care.

- Not just a failure of services, but of relationship, trust, and connection
- Emerges when systems prioritize compliance, efficiency, or “objectivity” over relationship
- The result: individuals become data points, and care becomes conditional
- Reflects what Marc Dones calls “network impoverishment”—the erosion of the social networks that allow people to access safety, trust, and care within systems

Sociotechnical Roots of Relational Collapse

- **Sociotechnical systems** are made up of people, tools, structures, norms, and feedback loops
- They are designed—with values embedded into code, policy, and workflow
- When built on assumptions of **scarcity, surveillance, or neutrality**, they inevitably displace care
- **Oppression (racism, homophobia, etc.) is coded into the system's “normal” operations**

Relational Refusals: A Framework for Repairing What Systems Forgot

Relational Refusals are intentional acts—within research, service design, and daily practice—that reject systemic disconnection and instead prioritize relationship, responsibility, and repair.

- A refusal of extractive research, punitive timelines, and shallow “engagement”
- A commitment to story, moving at the speed of trust, and being in right relation with people, land, and systems
- Draws from Indigenous methodologies, Black feminist thought, queer theory, and sociotechnical critique

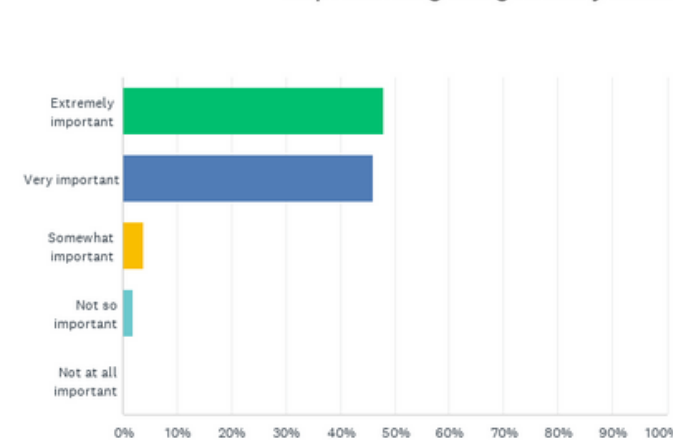
“The System Is Cold”: What Indigenous Youth Taught Me About Refusal

“Like, Indigenous-led mental health programs and healing practices that better address trauma... that’s the stuff that would help reduce homelessness”
— interviewee

- Youth repeatedly described systems as **lonely, unfeeling, and automated**
- Disconnection wasn’t just logistical—it was **spiritual, relational, and ancestral**
- One youth said they didn’t want “services”—they wanted someone to **see them and stay**
- Youth didn’t just describe broken services—they described **a collapse of connection**. They trusted people, not systems. This is what network impoverishment looks and feels like.

“I Feel Invisible”: The Data Mirrors the Story

Q3 How important do you believe reconnection and reunification with family and culture are in preventing Indigenous youth homelessness?



Q6 How can programs better support urban Indigenous youth in maintaining connections to their culture and traditions?

programs better support learn culture also language classes support urban indigenous resources family learning
help incorporating youth traditions urban Indigenous youth indigenous youth maintaining
community histories cultural connected programs traditional practices
culture traditions youth maintaining connections providing heritage offering practices mentorship
involving traditional materials elders connect cultural better support urban

- **84%** of respondents reported *feeling disconnected* from available services
- **71%** said *no one asked them what they needed* before being placed
- **63%** had experienced *at least one system (e.g., school, foster care, shelter) where they felt actively unsafe*
- These aren't just statistics. They are indicators of **relational breakdown**—of systems without infrastructure to hold people in meaningful ways

From Analysis to Accountability: Who Are *You* Responsible To?

“Ceremonies, language programs, land-based education—those are the things that build resilience and belonging” - interviewee

People, Places, and Things Practice Take a moment to reflect:

- Who are the **people** you are responsible to?
- What **places** do you hold, come from, or serve?
- What are the **things**—grief, methods, memories, values—you carry in your work?

**My Name is Isaac
Andrew Sanders
(they/Them)**

I am named after my grandfather, Isaac L. Sanders, and my maternal great grandfather, Andrew Blue. My grandmothers name is Lula Verne Sanders. I was raised in a single parent household and I do not know much about my paternal lineage.



I HAVE OCCUPIED A LOT OF PLACES

I currently occupy the unceded land of the Duwamish, Suquamish, Muckleshoot, Cayuse, Umatilla and Walla Walla, currently.



Values and Passions

What Has Guided Me Here Today



"Dominant culture has tried to keep us all afraid, to make us choose safety instead of risk, sameness instead of diversity. Moving through that fear, finding out what connects us, reveling in our differences: this is the process that brings us closer, that gives us a world of shared values, of meaningful community."

— Bell Hooks

Commitment to My Responsibilities

I am a relative to all things on this Earth. I try my best to do the least amount of harm every single day knowing I will still do harm. I'm always in draft.

Commitment to Imagining Possibilities

I am a student of Octavia Butler, Toni Morrison, and Bell Hooks. I know that I can not be anything that I can not dream. I dream of a world where everyone can exist in a restorative and community driven world.

Commitment to Being a Problem

I have been given life from peoples who have deliberately murdered and used for the comfort of others. I think discomfort is necessary for change so I decide to be a problem every day.

Current Projects



LGBTQ+ Student Experiences Paper

Just completed the revise and resubmit process for my first first author paper that was a quantitative analysis of LGBTQ+ experiences at research universities that I did with Queer and Transgender People in Education (QTPE)

Indigenous Youth Homelessness Survey and Interviews

Partnering with Point Source Youth, I am conducting a mixed method study to understand the experiences of indigenous homeless youth and what they believe they need to be housed. Still doing qualitative interviews

LGBTQ+ Digital Mental Health

Graduate research assistantship work with professor Meghan Romaneli. Conducting online focus groups to co-design online DIY mental health tools for Mental Health America's website.

Designing Systems That Can Love Us Back

- Move from **compliance-driven systems** to **relational infrastructures**
- Embed **time, trust, and co-design** into every step of service delivery
- Design with—not just for—communities most impacted
- Use relational refusals to guide **ethical research, policy, and practice**

With Deep Gratitude

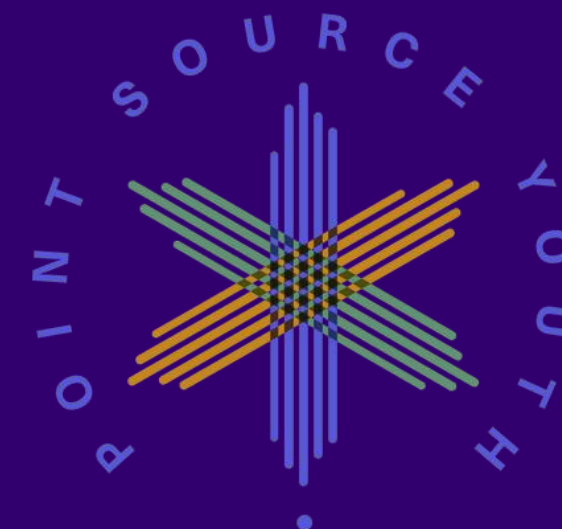
Thank you to the organizations, comrades, and communities who made this work possible:

- **Point Source Youth**
- **Center for Human Rights** in the Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies
- **Rocío Evelin Carranza Jacinto**
- **Jasper Calkins-McQuillen**
- To the participants and community partners—thank you for trusting us with your **people, places, and things.**

You didn't just inform this work.

You made it possible.

You illuminated the problem—and the path forward.



Questions, Reflections, or Refusals?

Let's stay in relationship and conversation.

Isaac A. Sanders, MSW

Email: isaacsanderconsulting@gmail.com

Website: isaacsandersconsulting.com

@alltimeisaac1 on TikTok

Substack: The Life & Times of a Burnt Out PhD Student