

**Chapter 7.21 RCW
CONTEMPT OF COURT**

Sections

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RCW 7.21.010 Definitions. The definitions in this section apply throughout this chapter:

(1) "Contempt of court" means intentional:

(a) Disorderly, contemptuous, or insolent behavior toward the judge while holding the court, tending to impair its authority, or to interrupt the due course of a trial or other judicial proceedings;

(b) Disobedience of any lawful judgment, decree, order, or process of the court;

(c) Refusal as a witness to appear, be sworn, or, without lawful authority, to answer a question; or

(d) Refusal, without lawful authority, to produce a record, document, or other object.

(2) "Punitive sanction" means a sanction imposed to punish a past contempt of court for the purpose of upholding the authority of the court.

(3) "Remedial sanction" means a sanction imposed for the purpose of coercing performance when the contempt consists of the omission or refusal to perform an act that is yet in the person's power to perform. [1989 c 373 s 1.]

RCW 7.21.020 Sanctions—Who may impose. A judge or commissioner of the supreme court, the court of appeals, or the superior court, a judge of a court of limited jurisdiction, and a commissioner of a court of limited jurisdiction may impose a sanction for contempt of court under this chapter. [1998 c 3 s 1; 1989 c 373 s 2.]

RCW 7.21.030 Remedial sanctions—Payment for losses. (1) The court may initiate a proceeding to impose a remedial sanction on its own motion or on the motion of a person aggrieved by a contempt of court in the proceeding to which the contempt is related. Except as provided in RCW 7.21.050, the court, after notice and hearing, may impose a remedial sanction authorized by this chapter.

(2) If the court finds that the person has failed or refused to perform an act that is yet within the person's power to perform, the court may find the person in contempt of court and impose one or more of the following remedial sanctions:

(a) Imprisonment if the contempt of court is of a type defined in RCW 7.21.010(1) (b) through (d). The imprisonment may extend only so long as it serves a coercive purpose.

(b) A forfeiture not to exceed two thousand dollars for each day the contempt of court continues.

(c) An order designed to ensure compliance with a prior order of the court.

(d) Any other remedial sanction other than the sanctions specified in (a) through (c) of this subsection if the court expressly finds that those sanctions would be ineffectual to terminate a continuing contempt of court.

(e) (i) In at-risk youth petition cases only under chapter 13.32A RCW and subject to the requirements under RCW 13.32A.250, commitment to a secure residential program with intensive wraparound services.

(ii) Beginning July 1, 2023, prior to committing any youth to a secure residential program with intensive wraparound services as a sanction for contempt in at-risk youth petition cases only under chapter 13.32A RCW, or for failure to appear at a court hearing in at-risk youth petition cases only under chapter 13.32A RCW, the court must:

(A) Consider, on the record, the mitigating and aggravating factors used to determine the appropriateness of detention for enforcement of its order;

(B) Enter written findings affirming that it considered all less restrictive options, that detention is the only appropriate alternative, including its rationale and the clear, cogent, and convincing evidence used to enforce the order;

(C) Afford the same due process considerations that it affords all youth in criminal contempt proceedings; and

(D) Seek input from all relevant parties, including the youth.

(iii) Nothing in this subsection (2)(e) or in RCW 13.32A.250, 13.34.165, or 28A.225.090 shall be construed to limit the court's inherent contempt power or curtail its exercise.

(3) The court may, in addition to the remedial sanctions set forth in subsection (2) of this section, order a person found in contempt of court to pay a party for any losses suffered by the party as a result of the contempt and any costs incurred in connection with the contempt proceeding, including reasonable attorney's fees.

(4) If the court finds that a person under the age of eighteen years has willfully disobeyed the terms of an order issued under *chapter 10.14 RCW, the court may find the person in contempt of court and may, as a sole sanction for such contempt, commit the person to juvenile detention for a period of time not to exceed seven days. [2019 c 312 s 6; 2019 c 312 s 5; 2019 c 312 s 4; 2019 c 312 s 3; 2001 c 260 s 6; 1998 c 296 s 36; 1989 c 373 s 3.]

***Reviser's note:** Chapter 10.14 RCW was repealed in its entirety by 2021 c 215 s 170, effective July 1, 2022.

Effective date—2019 c 312 ss 6 and 9: "Sections 6 and 9 of this act take effect July 1, 2023." [2019 c 312 s 22.]

Effective date—2019 c 312 ss 5 and 14: "Sections 5 and 14 of this act take effect July 1, 2021." [2019 c 312 s 21.]

Effective date—2019 c 312 ss 4, 8, and 12: "Sections 4, 8, and 12 of this act take effect July 1, 2020." [2019 c 312 s 20.]

Findings—Intent—2019 c 312: See note following RCW 7.21.080.

Findings—Intent—2001 c 260: "The legislature finds that unlawful harassment directed at a child by a person under the age of eighteen is not acceptable and can have serious consequences. The legislature further finds that some interactions between minors, such as "schoolyard scuffles," though not to be condoned, may not rise to the level of unlawful harassment. It is the intent of the legislature that a protection order sought by the parent or guardian of a child as provided for in this chapter be available only when the alleged behavior of the person under the age of eighteen to be restrained rises to the level set forth in chapter 10.14 RCW." [2001 c 260 s 1.]

Findings—Intent—Part headings not law—Short title—1998 c 296: See notes following RCW 74.13.025.

RCW 7.21.040 Punitive sanctions—Fines. (1) Except as otherwise provided in RCW 7.21.050, a punitive sanction for contempt of court may be imposed only pursuant to this section.

(2) (a) An action to impose a punitive sanction for contempt of court shall be commenced by a complaint or information filed by the prosecuting attorney or city attorney charging a person with contempt of court and reciting the punitive sanction sought to be imposed.

(b) If there is probable cause to believe that a contempt has been committed, the prosecuting attorney or city attorney may file the information or complaint on his or her own initiative or at the request of a person aggrieved by the contempt.

(c) A request that the prosecuting attorney or the city attorney commence an action under this section may be made by a judge presiding in an action or proceeding to which a contempt relates. If required for the administration of justice, the judge making the request may appoint a special counsel to prosecute an action to impose a punitive sanction for contempt of court.

A judge making a request pursuant to this subsection shall be disqualified from presiding at the trial.

(d) If the alleged contempt involves disrespect to or criticism of a judge, that judge is disqualified from presiding at the trial of the contempt unless the person charged consents to the judge presiding at the trial.

(3) The court may hold a hearing on a motion for a remedial sanction jointly with a trial on an information or complaint seeking a punitive sanction.

(4) A punitive sanction may be imposed for past conduct that was a contempt of court even though similar present conduct is a continuing contempt of court.

(5) If the defendant is found guilty of contempt of court under this section, the court may impose for each separate contempt of court a fine of not more than five thousand dollars or imprisonment for up to three hundred sixty-four days, or both. [2011 c 96 s 3; 2009 c 37 s 1; 1989 c 373 s 4.]

Findings—Intent—2011 c 96: See note following RCW 9A.20.021.

RCW 7.21.050 Sanctions—Summary imposition—Procedure. (1) The judge presiding in an action or proceeding may summarily impose either a remedial or punitive sanction authorized by this chapter upon a person who commits a contempt of court within the courtroom if the judge certifies that he or she saw or heard the contempt. The judge shall impose the sanctions immediately after the contempt of court or at the end of the proceeding and only for the purpose of preserving order in the court and protecting the authority and dignity of the court. The person committing the contempt of court shall be given an opportunity to speak in mitigation of the contempt unless compelling circumstances demand otherwise. The order of contempt shall recite the facts, state the sanctions imposed, and be signed by the judge and entered on the record.

(2) A court, after a finding of contempt of court in a proceeding under subsection (1) of this section may impose for each separate contempt of court a punitive sanction of a fine of not more than five hundred dollars or imprisonment for not more than thirty days, or both, or a remedial sanction set forth in RCW 7.21.030(2). A forfeiture imposed as a remedial sanction under this subsection may not exceed more than five hundred dollars for each day the contempt continues. [2009 c 37 s 2; 1989 c 373 s 5.]

RCW 7.21.060 Administrative actions or proceedings—Petition to court for imposition of sanctions. A state administrative agency conducting an action or proceeding or a party to the action or proceeding may petition the superior court in the county in which the action or proceeding is being conducted for a remedial sanction specified in RCW 7.21.030 for conduct specified in RCW 7.21.010 in the action or proceeding. [1989 c 373 s 6.]

RCW 7.21.070 Appellate review. A party in a proceeding or action under this chapter may seek appellate review under applicable court rules. Appellate review does not stay the proceedings in any other action, suit, or proceeding, or any judgment, decree, or order in the action, suit, or proceeding to which the contempt relates. [1989 c 373 s 7.]

RCW 7.21.080 Juvenile detention as remedy. (1) It is the policy of the state of Washington to eliminate the use of juvenile detention as a remedy for contempt of a valid court order for youth under chapters 13.34 and 28A.225 RCW and child in need of services petition youth under chapter 13.32A RCW.

(a) Beginning July 1, 2020, youth may not be committed to juvenile detention as a contempt sanction under chapter 13.34 RCW, and a warrant may not be issued for such youth for failure to appear at a court hearing that requires commitment of such youth to juvenile detention.

(b) Beginning July 1, 2020, youth may not be committed to juvenile detention as a contempt sanction for child in need of services proceedings under chapter 13.32A RCW, and a warrant may not be issued for such youth for failure to appear at a court hearing that requires commitment of such youth to juvenile detention.

(c) Beginning July 1, 2021, youth may not be committed to juvenile detention as a contempt sanction for truancy proceedings under chapter 28A.225 RCW, and a warrant may not be issued for such youth for failure to appear at a court hearing that requires commitment of such youth to juvenile detention.

(2) (a) It is also the policy of the state of Washington to entirely phase out the use of juvenile detention as a remedy for contempt of a valid court order for at-risk youth under chapter 13.32A RCW by July 1, 2023. After this date, at-risk youth may not be committed to juvenile detention as a contempt sanction under chapter 13.32A RCW, and a warrant may not be issued for failure to appear at a court hearing that requires commitment of the at-risk youth to juvenile detention.

(b) Until July 1, 2023, any at-risk youth committed to juvenile detention as a sanction for contempt under chapter 13.32A RCW, or for failure to appear at a court hearing under chapter 13.32A RCW, must be detained in such a manner so that no direct communication or physical contact may be made between the youth and any youth who is detained to juvenile detention pursuant to a violation of criminal law, unless these separation requirements would result in a youth being detained in solitary confinement.

(c) After July 1, 2023, at-risk youth may be committed to a secure residential program with intensive wraparound services, subject to the requirements under RCW 13.32A.250, as a remedial sanction for contempt under chapter 13.32A RCW or for failure to appear at a court hearing under chapter 13.32A RCW. [2019 c 312 s 2.]

Effective date—2019 c 312: "Except for sections 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 12, and 14 of this act, this [act is] necessary for the immediate preservation of the public peace, health, or safety, or support of the state government and its existing public institutions, and takes effect July 1, 2019." [2019 c 312 s 19.]

Findings—Intent—2019 c 312: "(1) The legislature finds that it is a goal of our state to divert juveniles who have committed status offenses, behaviors that are prohibited under law only because of an individual's status as a minor, away from the juvenile justice system because a stay in detention is a predictive factor for future criminal justice system involvement. The legislature finds that Washington has been using the valid court order exception of the juvenile justice and delinquency prevention act, a loophole in federal law allowing judges to detain status offenders for disobeying court orders, more than any other state in the country. The legislature finds that use of the valid court order exception to detain youth for acts like truancy, breaking curfew, or running away from home is counterproductive and may worsen outcomes for at-risk youth.

(2) The legislature further finds that these youth should not be confined with or treated with the same interventions as criminal offenders. The legislature also finds that studies show a disproportionality in race, gender, and socioeconomic status of youth referred to courts or detained, or both. Likewise, the legislature finds that community-based interventions are more effective at addressing underlying causes of status offenses than detention and can reduce court caseloads and lower system costs. As a result, it is the intent of the legislature to strengthen and fund community-based

programs that are culturally relevant and focus on addressing disproportionality of youth of color, especially at-risk youth.

(3) The legislature finds that appropriate interventions may include secure, semi-secure, and nonsecure out-of-home placement options, community-based mentoring, counseling, family reconciliation, behavioral health services, and other services designed to support youth and families in crisis and to prevent the need for out-of-home placement. The legislature recognizes that in certain circumstances, a court may find pursuant to this act that less restrictive alternatives to secure confinement are not available or appropriate and that clear, cogent, and convincing evidence requires commitment to a secure residential program with intensive wraparound services. The legislature intends to expand the availability of such interventions statewide by July 1, 2023." [2019 c 312 s 1.]