



Kids Behind Bars in Venezuela

Publisher [Human Rights Watch](#)

Publication Date 12 April 2018

Cite as Human Rights Watch, *Kids Behind Bars in Venezuela*, 12 April 2018, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5b39f2a14.html> [accessed 28 January 2019]

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April 12, 2018 12:00PM EDT

Published in *Caracas Chronicles*

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Original art by @modográfico @modográfico

Imagine learning that your teenager is being held – and brutalized – at the headquarters of your country's national intelligence service. In Venezuela, the government of President Nicolás Maduro is arresting and detaining – in horrific conditions – teenagers who use Facebook to call on friends to attend anti-government demonstrations.

Argenis González is the parent of one such child. At about 6 o'clock on the morning of January 10, as he was getting ready to go to work, a group of armed intelligence agents banged on his door. The agents led away his 17-year-old son, Ender González, and took his laptop, too.

They needed the boy for questioning, they said. The family spent the day frantically searching Caracas for him, from one court and security forces' headquarters to the next.

Finally, the mother of another arrested 17-year-old, Diego Gómez, told them that both boys were about to be arraigned at a special youth court in Caracas.

González attended the arraignments. The boys were charged with inciting people through Facebook to take to the streets in an anti-government demonstration. The prosecutor applied the "Law against Hatred," adopted last November by the Constituent Assembly, the body Maduro created to bypass the elected legislature. The law penalizes actions that might "encourage, promote, or incite" activities vaguely defined as "hatred." The teenagers could be sentenced to up to 20 years prison.

Dylan Canache, 16, is another teenager swept up this year. At dawn on January 13, Dylan told his mother that he was heading to a nearby metro station to pick up a friend who had called him looking for a place to stay. Intelligence agents waiting at the station with his friend arrested Dylan. Dylan's family was also frantic with worry until they found him on January 15, after his arraignment the day before, at the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (SEBIN) headquarters. Intelligence agents later told Dylan's family that he was accused of participating in an online group chat in which participants spoke about protests, and his family learned from judicial sources that he was charged with "instigating hatred."

Family members said the courts allowed the release of the three boys under a form of bail in which, in Venezuela, a guarantor assures the judge that the accused will show up for court. Although the court accepted the guarantors' paperwork, SEBIN agents failed to release them. The boys remain in detention at SEBIN headquarters – unable to see or speak with their families during the three months since their arrests. Ender turned 18 in detention.

Dylan is being held with adults in a cell without drinking water and with very poor hygiene, a detainee who is being held at SEBIN and spoke briefly with him said. Guards cut his hair, making fun of him, the source said. Dylan's family has been unable to verify how he's doing.

These are not the first or the only children to be held by intelligence services in Venezuela, local activists say.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by Venezuela in 1990, protects children's rights to free speech and peaceful assembly. State parties should ensure that children are not subjected to torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Countries that have signed the treaty are supposed to guarantee that children are not deprived of their liberty unlawfully or arbitrarily. When children are detained, agents should hold them separate from adults, unless it has been determined that it is in the child's best interest to be held with a particular adult. Similar rights are provided for in Venezuelan law.

Not only has the Maduro government violated all these rights in the case of these three boys, but given the lack of judicial independence, it will most likely violate their right to challenge the legality of their detentions.

The cases of Ender, Diego, and Dylan are a gruesome reminder of how far Venezuelan authorities are going to crack down on dissent. Intelligence services in Venezuela operate with complete impunity, detaining ordinary citizens whose only "crime" is to oppose the government. This time, their dragnet fell on three kids.

Latin American governments that have already voiced concern about political prisoners in Venezuela should call on the Maduro government to immediately and unconditionally release all children from intelligence headquarters. They should also take these cases as yet another reminder of why they should impose targeted sanctions against Venezuelan officials implicated in serious rights violations. In doing so, they would send an important message that they are watching what is happening to Ender, Diego, and Dylan – and any other children the government is locking up for no proper reason. They would also signal to high-level Venezuelan officials that unjust official

behavior of this kind will not be tolerated – and that evidence of misbehavior is being retained and will one day be used to secure accountability.

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