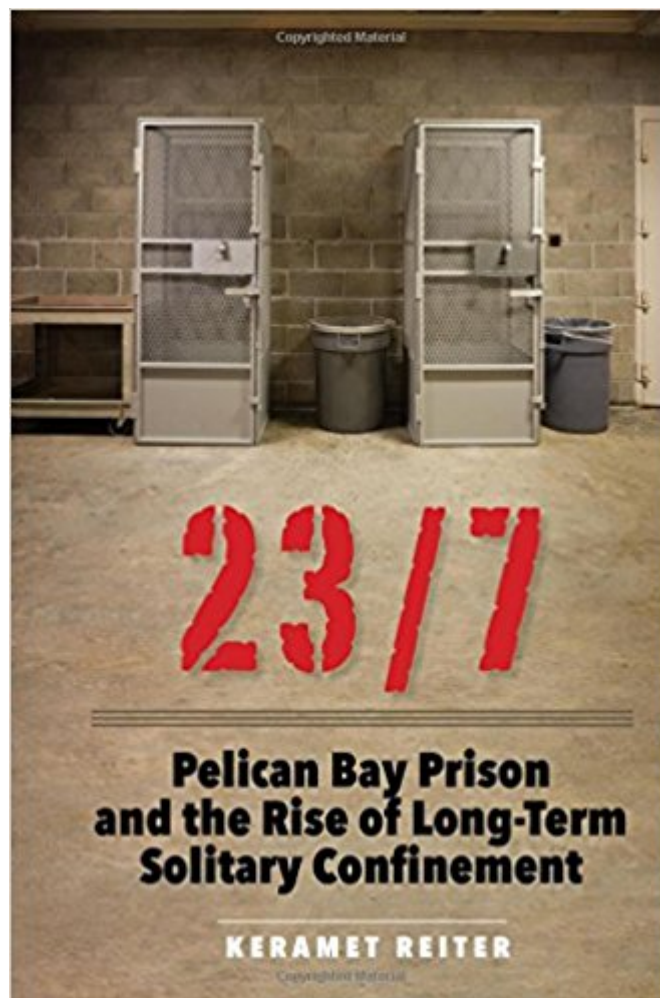




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# 23/7: Pelican Bay Prison And The Rise Of Long-Term Solitary Confinement



## Synopsis

How America's prisons turned a "brutal and inhumane" practice into standard procedure Originally meant to be brief and exceptional, solitary confinement in U.S. prisons has become long-term and common. Prisoners spend twenty-three hours a day in featureless cells, with no visitors or human contact for years on end, and they are held entirely at administrators' discretion. Keramet Reiter tells the history of one "supermax," California's Pelican Bay State Prison, whose extreme conditions recently sparked a statewide hunger strike by 30,000 prisoners. This book describes how Pelican Bay was created without legislative oversight, in fearful response to 1970s radicals; how easily prisoners slip into solitary; and the mental havoc and social costs of years and decades in isolation. The product of fifteen years of research in and about prisons, this book provides essential background to a subject now drawing national attention.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"23/7 tells a compelling story of the banality of evil in correctional planning and penal confinement."—Franklin E. Zimring, University of California, Berkeley"Engaging, meticulously researched, and deeply disturbing, 23/7 is more than a history of Pelican Bay Prison. Keramet Reiter opens a window onto the secretive decisions that produced the contemporary supermax and sensitively explores the harmful results. This remarkable book is essential reading for anyone concerned about prisons in the United States."—Lorna A. Rhodes, author

of *23/7: Total Confinement: Madness and Reason in the Maximum Security Prison*. Keramet Reiter uncovers the history and consequences of California's unfortunate modern experiment with solitary confinement – a tale of public policy gone awry through ignorance, callousness, cruelty and self interest, inflicting untold psychological pain and emotional misery on thousands." – Jamie Fellner, Human Rights Watch

"23/7 is a convincing, heartbreaking, enraging explanation of how prison bureaucrats, empowered by a fearful electorate, gained the power to entomb human beings for five, ten, twenty years and more in small boxes without windows where the lights are never turned off. I have not read a book in recent years that has made me angrier than this or explained more about how, when it comes to prisons, Americans have dug ourselves such a very deep hole." – Ted Conover, author of *Newjack: Guarding Sing Sing*

Keramet Reiter, an assistant professor in the Department of Criminology, Law and Society and at the School of Law at the University of California, Irvine, has been an associate at Human Rights Watch and testified about the impacts of solitary confinement before state and federal legislators. She lives in Los Angeles, CA.

*23/7* is an astute analysis of the rise of long-term solitary confinement in California's prison system, focusing primarily on the development and exportation of the supermax model at Pelican Bay. Reiter is an expert on the topic, yet the book does not read like a dry academic study. It is remarkably readable--enjoyable, even--which is not an easy task for such distressing subject matter. Reiter shows convincingly how prison bureaucrats built supermaxes by leveraging a widely held trope about dangerous prisoners. She tells compelling stories about the experiences of individual prisoners and officials that shatter the idea that supermax prisoners are "the worst of the worst." According to Reiter (2016: 194), "Their stories reveal how supermaxes have failed to distinguish violent from nonviolent prisoners, failed to distinguish mad from bad, failed to cure violence, and failed to meet a battery of basic human needs." Reiter weaves together this narrative in an accessible manner of writing, and she is thoughtful and self-reflective about her own presuppositions at every turn. The book is a must-read for anyone interested in prisons and punishment. It is suitable for students of law, criminal justice and social science, as well as a broader public audience. Highly recommended!

*23/7* asks questions that most of us have never bothered to think about - why are people put in

solitary confinement? How long do they stay there? What is it like? How did our current system come to be? The answers, which will surprise you, consider multiple perspectives, and contain a combination of personal stories, statistics, and historical overview. It is a must read for anyone who is at all curious about the prison system.

I've gotten involved with Defy Ventures in the past year. As part of this, I am planning to go to Pelican Bay this year. This book helped me understand the background of why Pelican Bay and the SHU exist in the first place. More importantly, it helped me have context on the people incarcerated at the SHU. It's really well written and a must read for anyone engaging in any type of activity to be helpful around the criminal justice system.

Excellent book and very fast shipping. Thank you.

Wow! Tour de force examination of Pelican Bay, California's Supermax, as well as an examination of mass incarceration, and supermax prisons specifically. As Keramet Reiter explains, she started off intended to examine the policy considerations which went into the decision to build a supermax prison in California. However, as she began to dig, she realized there was NO legislative history. The construction of a supermax prison had NEVER been discussed by the legislature, no vote was taken, no consideration of competing policies/spending priorities occurred. Rather, the prison administration maneuvered to exempt itself from all applicable rules requiring legislative oversight, and then proceeded to construct the highest security, most isolating prison in history--designed to ensure that prisoners could be housed in concrete boxes indefinitely without ever having to touch another human being. Reiter examines how this decision was made in detail, discussing both the factual background and the policy considerations. However, her book does not stop there. Rather, it ALSO contains a detailed examination of who was confined in Pelican Bay--providing as comprehensive examination of whether it really houses the "worst of the worst" for the first time ever. She then examines the impact of prolonged solitary on some of those individuals. Finally, she chronicles some of the opposition to Pelican Bay, culminating in a massive hunger strike involving 30,000 prisoners throughout California, and an accompanying lawsuit. My quick take: read this!

23/7: Pelican Bay Prison and the Rise of Long-Term Solitary Confinement by Keramet Reiter is a free NetGalley ebook that I read in late August. Drawing from archival research and oral history interview, Reiter has created a detailed, masterful, interesting, albeit nervebreakingly claustrophobic

narrative about solitary confinement between the 1970's and the present day. Each chapter focuses on one person, one facet, and one event in this horrid, unhumane history and her stories quietly and masterfully urge for action. Way better and detailed than a standard criminology textbook, Reiter's work is to be commended.

This is a long-awaited and much-needed work on the systematic torture of human beings in California's worst of the worst prison for solitary confinement, Pelican Bay State Prison. One of the overriding reasons this work is so important is the astounding difficulty of it -- of summarizing a very complex and controversial penological system, of finding prisoners to speak about it, and of balancing the men's voices with legal and political and legislative facts. Keramet Reiter has shown a versatile ability to blend fact with humanity, thus making 23/7 a work of balance and truth. She lets the story be told by those who lived it, who suffered through it, and who survived it. Her compassion and respect shine through, though by no means does she tread lightly explaining the depths of an unconstitutional practice that society endorsed for decades. Keramet has been in this fight for a long time, and she is to be commended for tackling an unpopular subject. Even though much progress has been made in releasing inmates from the Security Housing Units, effectively shutting down many of the blocks statewide, the stigma and collateral damage of having been housed there for decades haunts every inmate who was entombed there. As well as family members, and society at large. Kudos and gratitude.

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