

Are your Master Keys Mastering You?

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One February morning, a woman heard a key turn in her apartment's lock. She watched in shock as a strange man entered her home. He said he was from pest control, but he carried no equipment.

Another woman came home one day to find her Toledo, OH apartment ransacked. Her TV had been torn from the wall, her vacuum cleaner had gone missing, and even her groceries had vanished.

In Mankato, MN, a man entered his apartment and found a woman he didn't know stuffing his belongings into a bag. She claimed she'd thought her cheating ex-boyfriend lived there, and she wanted revenge by taking his belongings.

A resident of a Billings, MT apartment captured camera footage of a maintenance worker entering the resident's home and stealing prescription medication.

These stories have one thing in common: Each of the perpetrators used master keys to gain entry into the units where they committed their crimes. How did they obtain the keys? Two of the trespassers were vendors who'd been given (or had access to) a key, one was a maintenance worker who had presumably had access to the key as part of his job, and another refused to disclose where he'd gotten the key.

While multifamily industry leaders have indicated that handing out master keys to employees or vendors is a thing of the past, the fact that crimes involving master key misuse are still making headlines (all the stories mentioned previously are from 2018) demonstrates otherwise. This practice presents several problems that make key control difficult, if not impossible.

The Problems with Master Key Use

As the stories above demonstrate, keeping master keys out of the hands of unauthorized people and preventing authorized key holders from abusing keys is challenging. If someone is allowed to hold onto a master key or if they don't fill out a key

log, how do you know exactly who has checked out keys, when, and why?

Even if someone checks out a master key and records a reason such as "Showed unit #221," how can you be sure the person used the key to enter that specific unit?

If a tenant is harmed as a result of master key abuse or theft, your property may also face negligent security suits, according to security expert Chris E. McGoey. Property managers have a duty of care to protect the keys to someone's home, and because master keys come with foreseeable risks and liability, McGoey recommends against using them.

Of course, as the law firm Provo-Petersen & Associates, P.A., explains, Minnesota landlords only have a duty to prevent a wrongful act by a third party in cases where the act could be reasonably anticipated. According to Provo-Petersen, "Acts such as sexual assault will rarely be deemed foreseeable in the absence of prior similar incidents."

However, even if your property weren't held legally responsible for someone using a master key to enter a tenant's home and physically harm the resident, you would still be morally responsible. Also, if you did nothing to prevent a similar crime in the future and another incident did occur, the victim would then have a precedent to refer back to.



In addition, imagine the damage security breaches do to your reputation. The 2018 Property Management Report by reputation.com analyzed over 400,000 tenant reviews for over 9,000 apartment-style residential locations in the U.S. Its findings showed that safety was one of the categories that had an impact on overall tenant experience.

Data from Entrata revealed that 94 percent of residents read online reviews when searching for an apartment, so your property can't afford to ignore issues that would affect your reputation.

How to Reclaim Control of Your Keys

To improve key security at your property, there are a few essential steps:

- **Avoid Using Master Keys for Everyday Use** — For everyday tasks such as showing units and performing repairs, grant access to individual units. If you keep master keys for emergencies, ensure that they're locked away securely and can only be accessed by authorized personnel. Ideally, require two people to be present when removing the key.
- **Maintain Accurate Records** — Keep a record of which employees are authorized to access keys and when. Each time a key is removed or returned, record who removed it and why. Key activity reports are a must, especially if you need to refer to them for resident disputes about key use or even litigation.
- **Reduce the Risk of Human Error or Manipulation** — The more you rely on optional steps when a person checks out keys, the more the key log's credibility and authenticity can be called into question.
- **Ensure Keys Can't Be Easily Removed for Unauthorized Reasons** — It should be virtually impossible for an employee to remove a key for an unauthorized reason or for an intruder to remove a key for malicious purposes.

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If a potential security breach occurs, you need to have a way to detect and address it promptly.

Properties typically go one of three different routes to meet these objectives. Let's examine what they are and the advantages and disadvantages of each.

Manual Process

Traditionally, multifamily key control processes involve hanging keys on a pegboard or in a cabinet and using a key log to keep track of who removes keys and when. This method requires the least upfront investment, which makes it appealing to properties with smaller budgets.

One of the drawbacks is that physical security for the keys is limited, because if anyone can enter the area where the keys are stored, it wouldn't be hard to swipe a key from a pegboard or pry open a key cabinet. Reducing human error is also challenging, since you have to maintain a manual log.

Electronic Key Control System

Electronic key control systems are typically either wall-mounted panels or electronic drawers that store keys and record when a key is removed. The components are controlled by a central operating system running key control software.

Assuming the system is made of sturdy materials such as thick-paned glass or tamper-proof steel, it provides more physical security for keys than pegboards or cabinets. To reduce the risk of human error, the system automatically creates an audit trail of key use and allows managers to set up access levels for users. Note, however, that some systems still require manual steps, such as scanning a key tag, which still poses a risk of human error.

This method of key control does have a steeper learning curve than manual key control methods, but a key control provider that offers training services can help your users learn their way around the system and ensure your property uses it effectively.

Smart Locks

Smart locks, also called electronic locks or keyless entry, give residents the ability to unlock their doors with codes, fobs or even their smartphones. These types of locks offer benefits traditional locks don't, such as fewer lockouts and the ability for residents to grant friends and family access to their units when they're not there. They also allows property managers to easily track who has accessed each unit and when.

Keyless entry is convenient in a lot of ways, but it does come with more administrative effort than some property managers may

realize. For example, some electronic locks still have a physical key slot for backup keys in case the smart lock system goes down, which requires a secure key control process for managing the backup keys.

If the property uses a system with security tokens such as key fobs, programming the fobs can become nearly a full-time job depending on the size of the property, which has led some properties to program master versions that open all unit doors for staff to use. This practice presents the same risks as master keys. One way around this challenge is to preprogram a fob for each unit and manage them with an electronic key control system.

No matter which key control method your property uses, make sure you can confidently say who took a key (or fob) when, which units they accessed and why. Don't let master keys master you. ■

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