"Key" New Data

What does new research on multifamily access control trends reveal and what does it mean for your apartment community?.

By **CARL HANLY**, CAS, KeyTrak

K ey and access control technologies have transformed dramatically over the past several years, giving multifamily properties more options than ever for managing access to apartments. But widespread adoption of smart locks isn't happening yet. In fact, traditional keys are here to stay.

A nationwide KeyTrak survey of multifamily professionals, conducted in 2022 and again in 2024, reveals why some properties are embracing digital locks, while others are sticking to traditional metal keys. What does the data reveal and what does it mean for your apartment community?

Key Insights

Three Different Approaches

The most recent survey uncovered some unexpected insights into how properties are managing access control:

• **Traditional Keys:** 76% of multifamily professionals surveyed now use traditional keys exclusively — a significant 15% increase from 61% in 2022. Of these, 81% have no plans to implement smart locks.

• **Smart Locks:** 7% use smart locks exclusively, down from 8% in 2022.

• **Hybrid Approach:** Those using a combination of methods fell by nearly half, from 30% in 2022 to 16% in 2024. For 56% of these, metal keys are the primary means of apartment access, while a smaller number use traditional keys for digital lock backups, common areas, offices, storage spaces, and closets.
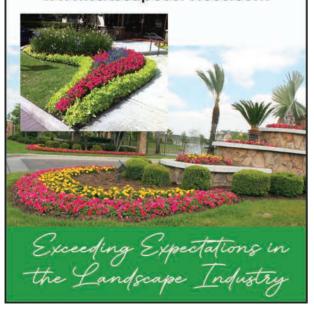
This data suggests property managers are increasingly making decisions based on operational realities rather than technological novelty.

The Appeal of Convenience

Multifamily professionals often turn to smart locks to make property operations more convenient. When asked why their properties adopted smart locks, respondents cited:

- Reducing the need for rekeying (22%, down from 36% in 2022)
- Standardizing technology across multiple properties (26%, down from 45%)
- Keeping up with industry trends (26%, down from 49%)
- Making lockouts easier to manage (33%, down from 44%)

Notably, no one mentioned security as a deciding factor. In fact, when respondents were asked if they believe smart locks are safer than traditional keys, only 38% said yes, while 44% said no, and 18% were unsure.

Operational Challenges

Multifamily professionals are all too familiar with the operational challenges of key management, from rekeying to maintaining key logs. But the survey revealed significant operational hurdles with smart locks as well. The top two challenges are finding time to program new fobs or codes (36%, up from 22%) and battery failures (30%, up from 24%).

In addition, 41% of those with smart lock systems that use fobs or access cards store these security tokens in a drawer, cabinet, or other easily accessible location. This practice not only makes tracking more difficult but creates security risks as well — negating some of the perceived advantages over physical keys.

Takeaways

Finding the Ideal Solution

There's no one-size-fits-all solution for access control. When evaluating your options, consider the following factors:

- **Security Priorities:** Weigh physical and digital security. For instance, are you more concerned about key loss and theft or the cybersecurity risks of using smart technology?
- **Resident Demographics:** Consider the age, lifestyle, and technological comfort of your residents. Younger residents might appreciate the convenience of smart locks, while older residents might prefer the familiarity of traditional keys.
- **Budget and Long-Term Costs:** Evaluate your current budget con-

straints alongside the long-term financial implications of implementing and maintaining various access control technologies.

• **Operational Goals:** Align your access control choices with your property's operational objectives, such as standardizing technology across multiple properties or enhancing resident satisfaction.

Planning for Challenges

Regardless of which system you choose, operational challenges will arise. Have a plan to address these issues:

• For smart locks, prepare for dead batteries and software malfunctions with backup access methods.

• For traditional keys, implement procedures for lost-key situations and regular rekeying.

• For all systems, secure keys and fobs in an electronic key control system to prevent unauthorized access and maintain a complete audit trail.

Looking Forward

Access control technology continues to evolve, but your core objective should be to provide secure, convenient access while maintaining operational efficiency.

Evidence suggests that traditional locks and keys will remain a cornerstone of effective multifamily security strategies for years to come. Regardless of the solution you use, remember that technology doesn't automatically simplify management. Strategic implementation and a deep understanding of your specific property's needs are the true keys to effective access control.

For a deeper dive into these findings and additional insights on multifamily access control trends, download the complete report at: keytrak.com/access-trends.

Carl Hanly is a regional manager with KeyTrak, Inc. He specializes in helping multifamily housing, student housing, military housing, and corporate housing clients conveniently minimize risks associated with managing their resident keys. He has received his Certified Apartment Supplier (CAS) accreditation from the National Apartment Association (NAA) and has completed NAA's Leadership Lyceum training. He is actively involved with the NAA National Supplier Council.