



Is Smarter Better?

New research shows multifamily professionals are split on smart locks vs. traditional keys.

By **CARL HANLY**, CAS, KeyTrak

Multifamily communities are getting smarter. Technology research group Omdia predicts that by 2025, around 40% of all U.S. apartments will be considered smart properties.

Residents living in smart properties enjoy amenities such as smart thermostats, smart appliances that communicate with staff about required maintenance, and smart locks – one of the most talked-about smart technologies in the industry.

But how do property management professionals feel about smart locks (also called electronic locks or keyless entry)? Are they truly an amenity, or are they a liability?

To find out, our market research team at KeyTrak asked 202 multifamily professionals to share their thoughts. The results were recently published in a report called “Smart Locks vs. Metal Keys: How are multifamily communities managing access control in 2022 and beyond?” Through our research, we noticed three overarching trends.

1. Some respondents prefer the security and tracking capabilities of smart locks.

In the survey, 47% of respondents said they use smart locks either exclusively or combined with traditional keys. The top three reasons respondents like smart locks are that they’re user friendly, convenient, and easy to track.

Property managers like that they can see when employees and contractors have accessed each apartment, which reduces liability. Additionally, unlike when a physical key is lost or stolen, they can simply reprogram the lock.

Electronic locks are also popular with some residents since they can easily unlock their doors with codes, fobs, or their smartphones. One multifamily professional said, “When we asked the residents which they would prefer — traditional keys or keyless entry — 80-85% of the residents opted for keyless entry.”

2. Others like the reliability and familiarity of traditional metal keys.

While smart locks are becoming more popular, not everyone is at ease with them. In fact, only 28% of total survey respondents believe smart locks are safer than traditional keys. Fifty-three percent of respondents reported that they still use physical keys exclusively, and 67% of those said they don’t have any plans to implement smart locks.

Why are they so wary of keyless entry? The most common objections were the risk of hacking, software malfunctions, and power loss. As one respondent pointed out, “In the event of an emergency or wiring failure, at least a traditional key will still get the door open. When it’s locked shut it’s a fire safety hazard.”

In addition, professionals from communities with an older demographic said resi-

dents were more comfortable with metal keys and wouldn’t (or didn’t) adapt well to electronic locks.

“I came from a community that used [smart locks],” said one person. “The installation was difficult for our residents, and our older residents weren’t a huge fan of change, so we got a lot of complaints in the office.”

3. Security is a priority for everyone.

Although respondents were split on whether smart locks or metal keys work better and are less risky, all agreed that security is important.

Of those whose communities have smart locks, nearly half (48%) said they implemented them because they provide better security than traditional locks. In keeping with respondents’ focus on improving security, 40% secure fobs or cards in an electronic key control system.

On the flip side, security is a motivating factor for the 67% of metal key users who said they have no plans to implement smart locks. As I mentioned earlier, many expressed a healthy distrust of smart technology and felt that traditional locks are more reliable and secure.

What’s the smart approach to key and access control?

So is smarter better? Or are tried-and-true metal keys the way to go? It depends. For example, smart locks that log door access

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are safer than master keys without an accurate access log. However, securing traditional keys in an electronic key control system that creates an automatic audit trail is safer than using smart locks with fobs programmed to open every apartment.

To decide on the safest method of controlling door access, follow these tips:

- **Think about your community's demographics.** In our research, ages 18-34 were the biggest champions of smart technology, but ages 45 and up preferred traditional keys. If your community already has other smart technologies and attracts a lot of college students or young professionals, smart locks could be a good solution for you. However, if retirees call your community home, they might be more comfortable with metal keys. If your community is somewhere in the middle, consider a hybrid approach (e.g., using traditional locks on apartments and smart locks for common areas).

- **Make sure you have a digital audit trail.** Whenever an employee or contractor accesses an apartment, it's critical to have a record of when and why. Avoid using manual logs that require employees to fill out the pertinent details. Instead, use a system that automatically logs when someone removes a key and/or unlocks an electronic lock. For a more complete audit trail, you can even combine these methods by storing key fobs or access cards in an electronic key control system.

- **Research and address vulnerabilities.** Security risks come in all forms. A criminal could hack into a smart lock system, an employee could lend their fob to someone, or someone could swipe a physical key off a desk. Help prevent security breaches with frequent staff training, resident education, software updates, and secure key control systems.

A smart approach to controlling access to apartments isn't just about the type of lock you use. It's about doing what it takes to protect residents. In that sense, yes, smarter is better. 🏠



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To download KeyTrak's full research report, visit keytrak.com/smartsurvey.