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New Research: Smart Locks Aren't Replacing Traditional Keys

The Four Hidden Hazards

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New Research:
Smart Locks Aren't Replacing Traditional Keys

BY CARL HANLY

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s key and access control technologies evolve, multifamily properties have more ways than ever to manage apartment access. Yet despite the rise of smart locks, traditional keys remain a mainstay. A nationwide KeyTrak survey of multifamily professionals, conducted in 2022 and again in 2024, revealed the following industry insights:

There Are Three Common Approaches
1. **Traditional keys:** Seventy-six percent of respondents now use traditional keys exclusively, up from 61 percent in 2022. Of those, 81 percent have no plans to implement smart locks.
2. **Smart locks:** Only 7 percent use smart locks exclusively, down slightly from 8 percent.
3. **Hybrid approach:** Use of mixed methods dropped from 30 percent to 16 percent.

Convenience, Not Security, Drives Adoption
Multifamily professionals often view smart locks as a way to enhance property operations. According to survey respondents, the top reasons for implementing smart locks include:
- Avoiding rekeying (22 percent, down from 36 percent in 2022);
- Standardizing technology across the organization's properties (26 percent, down from 45 percent);
- Viewing them as the way of the future (26 percent, down from 49 percent); and
- Simplifying lockout situations (33 percent, down from 44 percent).

Surprisingly, none cited security as a reason for adopting digital locks.

Smart Locks Introduce Operational Challenges
While smart locks have some advantages, they don't automatically simplify operations. Respondents cited issues with the following:
- Dead batteries (30 percent, up from 24 percent in 2022);
- The time required to program new fobs, codes, etc. (22 percent, down from 36 percent); and
- Software malfunctions (4 percent, down from 31 percent).

These operational challenges affect the overall user experience and increase the workload for property management staff.

Traditional Keys Aren't Going Anywhere
Traditional keys continue to play a vital role in multifamily properties, even as technology evolves. In addition to primary apartment keys, properties use keys for:
- Common areas
- Offices
- Backups
- Storage areas
- Closets
- Mailboxes
- Amenities
- Main doors

Factors such as familiarity, cost and perceived security risks may contribute to respondents' preference for traditional methods.

What Do These Findings Mean for Your Property?
Whether using smart locks or traditional keys, operational issues are inevitable. Smart locks require contingency plans for battery failures and system errors. Traditional keys need procedures for lost-key incidents and rekeying. With either system, storing keys and fobs in an electronic key control system helps prevent unauthorized access and maintains a full audit trail.

For more findings and insights into multifamily access control trends, download the full report at www.keytrak.com/access-trends. LAA

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