What property managers should verify for unit entry security

Why unit entry security matters for property managers

When a tenant moves out and a new one moves in, the security of the unit hinges on one thing: who still holds a key. It is easy to assume that returning all keys at move-out solves the problem, but in practice keys get copied, lost, or held onto by former tenants, contractors, or staff. A property manager who does not verify entry security before each turnover opens the door to liability, theft, and disputes.

Unit entry security is not just about the front door lock. It includes mailbox locks, common area access, and any shared entrances that the tenant uses. Each point of entry needs a fresh look every time a unit changes hands. This checklist walks through the essential checks a property manager should run before handing over keys to a new occupant.

Check the mailbox lock

A mailbox lock is often overlooked during turnover, yet it is one of the most accessible points of entry. Mailboxes sit in lobbies or near front doors, and a worn or outdated lock can be picked or jimmied easily. If the previous tenant kept a copy of the mailbox key, they could access mail for months after moving out. That is a privacy risk and a potential legal problem.

Property managers should inspect the mailbox lock for signs of wear, rust, or forced entry. If the key sticks or the cylinder turns roughly, the lock may need servicing. In many cases, the simplest solution is a mailbox lock replacement. A new lock ensures that only the current tenant and the property manager have access. It also avoids the hassle of tracking down lost keys from former tenants.

When replacing a mailbox lock, choose one that matches the existing system. Some buildings use a master key system for mailboxes so that management can access all boxes in an emergency. If that system is in place, the new lock must work with the master key. A locksmith can rekey the mailbox cylinder to the same master key while giving the tenant a unique key. That keeps security tight without complicating access for maintenance or postal workers.

Verify the unit door lock

The front door lock is the primary barrier between the unit and the hallway. A deadbolt is standard, but its condition matters as much as its presence. Check that the deadbolt extends fully into the strike plate and that the door fits snugly in the frame. A loose door or a worn strike plate can make it easy to force the lock open.



If the lock is old or shows signs of tampering, rekeying is the best move. Rekeying changes the internal pins so that old keys no longer work, but the lock hardware stays in place. It is faster and cheaper than replacing the entire lock, and it works well when the lock body is still in good shape. For units that have had several turnovers, rekeying should happen every time. No tenant should move into a unit where someone else could still unlock the door.

Some property managers prefer to replace the lock entirely after a certain number of turnovers. That is a judgment call based on the lock brand, usage, and wear. A quality deadbolt can last many years, but the cylinder may wear out faster. A locksmith can advise on whether rekeying or replacement makes more sense for a given unit.

Review common area access

Many units share common areas such as laundry rooms, storage lockers, or rooftop terraces. If these areas have locks, the tenant likely received a key or fob for them. At turnover, the property manager must collect those keys and change access codes if the system uses electronic fobs or keypads.

Electronic access systems make this task easier. The manager can deactivate the old tenant's fob or code and issue a new one to the incoming tenant. For mechanical locks on common areas, the same principle applies: rekey or replace the lock so that only current tenants and authorized staff can enter. A master key system often covers common areas, so rekeying those locks may require coordination with the building's master key plan.

If the building uses smart locks for common areas, verify that the software is up to date and that the access log has been reviewed. An access log shows who entered the common area and when. While a smart lock does not eliminate the need for physical key management, it gives the property manager a digital record that can help resolve disputes about unauthorized entry.

Evaluate the master key system

A master key system lets the property manager open every unit and common area with a single key. That is convenient for maintenance and emergencies, but it also means that one lost master key compromises the entire building. Property managers should audit who holds a master key and how those keys are stored.

At a minimum, the master key system should have a hierarchy: a grand master key for the property manager, sub-master keys for maintenance staff, and individual keys for each unit. When a staff member leaves the job, their master key must be returned and the system should be rekeyed if there is any risk that the key was copied. Rekeying a master system is more complex than rekeying a single lock because it involves multiple cylinders that all need to match the new master key. A locksmith can design a new master key system and rekey all affected locks at once.

For property managers overseeing multiple buildings, a single master key that works across all properties is a major security risk. Consider separate master key systems for each building, or use a restricted keyway that prevents unauthorized duplication. Restricted keyways require a signed authorization from the property manager before a locksmith can cut a copy. That adds a layer of control that standard keys do not offer.

Track tenant keys and access logs

Good record keeping is the backbone of unit entry security. Every key issued to a tenant, staff member, or contractor should be logged. The log should include the date issued, the person who received it, and the date it was returned. At turnover, the property manager checks that all keys are accounted for. If a key is missing, the lock should be rekeyed or replaced before the new tenant moves in.



For electronic locks, the access log serves the same purpose. It records every entry and exit, and it can flag unusual activity such as repeated failed attempts or entries at odd hours. Property managers should review the access log periodically, not just at turnover. A pattern of entries by a former tenant or a contractor who no longer works there could indicate a security breach.

Integrating key management with access logs is part of what makes key management for rental units effective. Without a system that ties physical keys to digital records, it is hard to know who has access at any given time. A simple spreadsheet can work for small buildings, but larger properties benefit from dedicated key management software that tracks issuance and return automatically.

Assess the need for smart locks

Smart locks are becoming common in rental units because they eliminate the need for physical keys. Tenants use a code or a smartphone app to enter, and the property manager can change the code remotely at turnover. That saves time and removes the risk of lost or copied keys.

But smart locks have their own security considerations. The lock must be installed correctly, and the battery should be checked regularly. If the battery dies, the tenant could be locked out. Most smart locks have a backup key override, but that key must be stored securely. The

property manager should also verify that the smart lock system uses encryption and that the manufacturer provides regular firmware updates. A smart lock that is not updated can be vulnerable to hacking.

For common areas, smart locks with temporary codes are useful. The manager can generate a code that expires after a set time, which is ideal for contractors or delivery personnel. The access log for a smart lock shows every entry, so the manager can see exactly who entered the common area and when. This transparency helps resolve disputes and can deter unauthorized use.

Even with smart locks, physical key management remains important. The backup key, the lock override, and any mechanical locks on the unit still need to be tracked. Smart locks reduce the workload but do not eliminate the need for a solid **key management for rental units** policy. Property managers should treat smart locks as a tool within a broader security system, not a replacement for good habits.

Inspect the door and frame

A lock is only as strong as the door it is mounted on. Check the door for cracks, warping, or damage near the lock area. A hollow-core door can be kicked in easily, even with a high-quality deadbolt. If the unit has a hollow-core door, consider replacing it with a solid-core door for better security.

The strike plate should be secured with long screws that reach into the door frame, not just the trim. Standard strike plates often use short screws that pull out under force. Replacing the screws with 3-inch screws can significantly strengthen the door assembly. This is a simple upgrade that a property manager can do without a locksmith.



Check the hinges as well. If the hinge pins are exposed on the outside, someone could remove them and lift the door off. For units where the door opens outward, hinge security is especially important. A simple fix is to install set screws or replace the hinges with non-removable pins. These small details make a big difference in overall entry security.

Coordinate with unit turnover

Unit turnover is the ideal time to address entry security. The unit is empty, so there is no disruption to a tenant. The property manager can schedule a locksmith to rekey or replace locks, inspect the door and frame, and update the key log. This should be a standard part of the turnover checklist, not an afterthought.

If the building has a mailbox lock that needs replacement, that can be done during turnover as well. A mailbox lock replacement is a quick job that a locksmith can complete while servicing the unit door lock. Doing both at once saves time and ensures that the new tenant has a complete set of secure entry points from day one.

Property managers who treat entry security as a routine part of turnover reduce the risk of unauthorized access, tenant complaints, and liability. A few hours of preparation and a small investment in lock maintenance can prevent months of headaches. The checklist above covers the main points, but every building is different. Work with a qualified locksmith to assess the specific needs of your property and to develop a turnover procedure that keeps security front and center.