

How to Lock Out Crime: Apartment Security & Safety

The reduction of crimes committed against persons who live in apartments and condominiums (multi-residential housing) should be a priority for any law enforcement agency responsible for their protection. There are some criminals who prey specifically upon apartments and condominiums. They know, for example, that many female and senior citizen owners and tenants live alone.

Most persons who are arrested for crimes against property are male and between 18-21 years old. They frequently live nearby their target areas and are familiar with the neighborhood. When involved in burglary or theft, they often work the property on foot, unless they need a vehicle to transport stolen merchandise. The property criminal may have lived in the multi-residential community or have a friend who is a current resident.

Most apartment and condominium buildings are secure and safe. However, you should be aware of, and periodically review, the security and safety of your apartment and apartment building.

In rental buildings, the building owner and management are responsible for security. In condominiums, suite security is typically an owner concern and the condominium corporation is responsible for common areas — including exterior doors and windows and corridor doors to individual apartments. Your best defense is to know about and use the security and safety features in your building and surrounding spaces. Be alert and prevent dangerous situations before they occur.

This segment highlights the types of security and safety features you may have in your building and how to use them effectively. It deals with personal security; and discouraging theft and trespassing.

Whether you own or rent your apartment, you can make it safer and secure for you and your family. If, after reading this segment, you realize that your apartment or building has security or safety issues, discuss them with your building management. Remember, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

Security: How Secure is Your Apartment?

Various methods are used to keep apartments and apartment buildings secure from trespassing, theft and vandalism. Security devices, such as deadbolt locks on doors, window locks, controlled-access entrances and well-lit common spaces all contribute to a secure building. Familiarize yourself with your building and apartment's security measures. The following sections discuss typical apartment building security features.

Apartment-Corridor Doors

Doors are a burglar's first choice of entry. Your apartment door should have a good deadbolt lock. One feature to look for is lock throw — the length the locking bolt protrudes from the door into the surrounding door frame when placed in the full lock

position. Test this by locking the door while it is open — a good deadbolt lock protrudes 35 mm (1 1/2 in.) or more when fully extended. A strong deadbolt lock also has a jimmy-proof strike plate (the part of the lock assembly mounted in the door frame to receive the bolt). The strike plate should be secured to the door framing by screws at least 50–75 mm (2–3 in.) long. This ensures the strike plate is fastened to the structure of the wall and not just the door frame.

Locks only work if you use them. Remember to lock your apartment even when you step out for a moment to check the mail. In fact, it is a good safety habit to keep the door locked at all times — even while you are in the apartment. Chain-type locks, which are easy to break, offer very little resistance to forced entry.

Install a door viewer (peephole) in your entrance door, if you do not already have one. If you have children, consider installing a peephole at their level.

Balcony Doors

Intrusion is not just a ground floor or corridor door threat. Always lock balcony doors when you are away from home. Equip balcony doors with the same type of deadbolt locks recommended for corridor doors. There is special hardware to secure sliding balcony doors but a simple, effective, inexpensive solution is a sturdy piece of wood in the door's track to prevent the sliding door from opening. Make sure the sliding part of the door can't be lifted from its track.

Items on the balcony are also vulnerable to theft. If thieves see valuables on a balcony — such as bicycles — they will climb a ladder to steal them. Conceal and secure items you cannot store inside. Lock bicycles.

Windows

Make sure all windows close fully, that the locking hardware is in good condition and that it is easy to lock the window when you shut it. Ensure that a thief cannot lift a horizontal window out of its track. Even on upper floors, a thief can get into your apartment through an open window overlooking a balcony. For more information on window security refer to the *Home Security-Windows* segment.

Storage Room

If you have a separate locker or storage room, store items out of reach and up off the floor. Cover them. Often, locker walls are chain-link fencing or wood slats. This means anyone can see what is in your locker and that your belongings are exposed to spills or floods. Also, ensure that door hinges and screws of the locking system are covered when the access door is locked. This will prevent a thief from getting into the locker by unscrewing the hasp or hinges.

Electronic Building Entry Systems

The front door entry system of most apartment buildings allows a resident to remotely let guests into the building. These systems are only effective if the front door locking system functions and intruders cannot take advantage of an open door to enter the building (*known as piggy-backing*).

When you activate the front door entry system, make sure you know who is asking to come in and remind them to close the door behind them. If you have young children or children visit often, ensure they know how to correctly operate the remote entry system. Would-be intruders will sometimes buzz different apartments until someone lets them in. Always be sure that you know the person before you let them into the apartment building. If you are unsure, notify the building management of the entry request so they can handle it.

Elevators & Lobbies

- Look and see who is in the elevator before entering. If you feel uncomfortable, **do not enter the elevator**, wait for the next one.
- Elevators and lobbies should be well lit, day and night.
- Interior lighting in lobbies and corridors should not be on an accessible switch but should instead be controlled by a timer or photocell.
- Stand beside the control panel in the elevator and know how to use the emergency alarm button.
- Possible hiding places under stairwells should be eliminated.
- Elevators should be equipped with both a telephone and alarm or duress buttons connected to the resident manager's unit and an outside central monitoring station.
- Lobbies should have glass doors, glass in exterior doors and/or side lights.
- If a suspicious person enters the elevator, leave before the door closes.

Laundry Rooms

Laundry rooms in apartment or condominium complexes can represent special security problems. The following crime prevention recommendations relate to these facilities:

- Ideally, the entrance into laundry rooms should be from the exterior of the building and clearly visible.
- Laundry room door locks should require a tenant or owner key.
- The laundry room door should have a window in it.

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- A duress alarm and/or telephone should be available in the laundry room.
- Interior lighting should be wired to remain on permanently during hours of operation.
- Residents should be encouraged *not* to use the laundry facilities alone or during late night hours.

Storage Areas

Multi-residential housing complexes sometimes have common storage rooms or areas. The following recommendations relate to these storage areas:

- Residents should be encouraged not to go into these storage areas alone or during late night hours.
- Doors into the storage room should require a tenant or owner key.
- The storage room door should have a window in it.
- Storage room bins or cages should be constructed as sturdily as possible. A good quality padlock should be used with a well-secured hasp.
- Tenants and owners should be encouraged not to store items of significant value in such storage areas.

Exercise or Workout Rooms

The same crime prevention or security recommendations applicable to laundry rooms are also applicable to common exercise or workout rooms.

Parking Garage Security

- If possible, use the parking garage during periods of high use when others are around.
- Watch for suspicious persons as you enter the parking garage. Drive back out if you are concerned.
- Be observant when approaching your car and have your keys in hand. Check front & rear seats before entering.
- Try not to park next to vans, large SUV's, pickup trucks or other vehicles whose size and structure can provide concealment.
- Park near exit doors or the elevator foyer, if possible.
- Park in well-lit areas.
- Walk in the center of the garage.

- Ask building management to install security cameras and alarm stations if the garage has a history of theft or security problems.

Building Security

Tell your building management if you have problems with closing or locking windows and doors. Report burned-out and broken lights in common areas, such as corridors, stairwells, garbage rooms, laundry areas, parking garages and outdoor areas. If your building is equipped with security cameras or alarm stations, make sure you know where they are and how to use them in emergencies. Report any suspicious or unfamiliar people loitering inside or outside the building to the building management.

Employees

Multi-residential complexes will usually have office, grounds and maintenance employees. Care should be taken in the employment and supervision of these employees because they have special access to units and often the trust of residents.

- Regular employees of the complex should be required to wear or display a picture type identification card while on duty.
- Non-office staff should wear a distinctive uniform.
- Contract maintenance or grounds personnel should be issued a temporary identification while on the premises. Temporary workers should surrender some valid identification to be held in the complex management office until the temporary ID is returned. In addition, all tenants need to be aware and familiar with the temporary identification.

Neighborhood Security

The safety of your neighborhood has an effect on your building's security. To find out if your building and neighborhood are safe, contact your local police department at its non-emergency number. Many police departments have web sites with information about criminal incidents. Police departments will review your building's security. Get involved with a neighborhood watch-type program or start one yourself— it is good protection and helps build a sense of community. Sometimes, if conditions warrant, it may be necessary to hire a security company.

Security Responsibility

The landlord or the condominium corporation (often through a property manager) is usually responsible for building security. Typically this involves:

- ensuring that security systems meet or exceed security requirements for apartment buildings, such as deadbolt locks on doors, good lighting and window locks;
- ensuring that security systems provide reasonable protection for all residents — in their apartments and in common areas, such as parking garages and elevators;

- conducting regular inspections to spot and fix security problems, such as broken locks or burned-out exterior lights, and asking residents to submit security concerns or suggestions as part of continuing maintenance;
- dealing with complaints about dangerous situations, suspicious activities or broken security items.

Personal Security

Personal security is largely a matter of continuing awareness of your surroundings, and reducing risks. As you approach your building, if something does not “feel” right, do not enter; go to another entrance or exit or get help from the building management or the police. If possible, schedule your arrivals and departures with other residents. Park your car in well-lit areas as close as possible to building entrances.

Do not leave messages on your phone saying you are away or on vacation. Tell a trustworthy neighbor when you plan to be away and ask the neighbor to pick up mail and flyers. Cancel newspaper subscriptions and consider using lights (energy efficient compact fluorescents are best as they consume the least electricity) and a radio on timers to make it look, and sound, as if someone is at home. Do not put a note on your door saying you are away. Cover the window in your mailbox (if there is one) to avoid drawing attention to an accumulation of mail.

Police, insurance companies and private security professionals can advise you or your landlord on ways to make your apartment building more secure.

You can do your part to keep the apartment building secure:

- Report any security concerns or problems to the building manager or landlord.
- Do not disable security features. Safety latches on windows keep intruders out — and children in.
- Do not prop exit doors open. These doors are designed to stay closed for security and fire safety.
- Do not hold the door for a stranger to enter. Be wary of strangers who linger around the front door and dash to hold the door open after it has been unlocked.
- Do not give your apartment keys or pass cards to strangers or tell strangers the access codes to the building.
- Tell building management and security personnel when you are planning to have work done on your apartment. Do not let anyone in to work in your apartment unless you, the landlord or the building manager has previously arranged for the work. Be wary of “security personnel” who knock unannounced.

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- If you live near the ground and you like to open your windows, make sure the windows do not open wide enough to let someone through. Use a window safety device (see “Preventing Falls from Windows and Balconies.”) You can also restrict a window opening with a removable nail or by placing a shortened broomstick in the track. Modifying the window itself, however, may void its warranty.
- If you or a family member has a disability, ensure that security features, such as locks on windows and doors, peepholes and security cameras, accommodate your needs.

General Security Recommendations

- Use the recommended wide-angle door viewer to “interview” strangers at the apartment or condominium entry door. Ask all salespersons, delivery persons, solicitors, information seekers, etc., to produce valid credentials such as a driver’s license and/or photo employee identification. Any stranger who does not cooperate should be reported to the police as a potential threat.
- If the building has an intercom system, occupants should use it wisely. They should never “buzz” the door for persons they do not know.
- The general entrance front door of an apartment or condominium building is a critical area for security. Strangers should not be permitted to enter the building when occupants are leaving or entering.
- Persons living alone should not place their full name on the identification slot or in the telephone directory. Adding a second initial — A & B Doe, rather than A. Doe — makes it appear that two people are living in a unit.
- If there are mailboxes in a lobby, cover up any slots so the contents aren’t visible. A box filled with the same mail from day-to-day is a sign the occupant is not at home.
- If an apartment unit has a mail slot in the entry door, cover it so nobody can flip it up and see the apartment is empty.
- If the occupant is out for the evening, they should leave a light on, even if they live on a high floor. Professional thieves can spot a completely dark unit from the ground.
- Occupants should participate in Operation Identification programs, if offered by the local police department or purchase an engraver on their own. They should engrave their driver’s license number (preceded by a state abbreviation) on property and equipment of value. It is also very important that the serial numbers of engraved items of property be maintained in a safe place. It is also advisable to maintain a photographic inventory of possessions and valuables.