

# Residence Hall Master Keys

## FIVE RISKS AND HOW TO AVOID THEM

BY TRICIA BUTLER

For campus housing professionals, providing students with a safe environment is a top priority. Knowing private spaces are protected from unauthorized access increases students' sense of security and gives their parents peace of mind.



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However, the common practice of using master keys poses significant challenges to residence halls. Being unable to account for all keys or failing to ensure their proper use can create a critical security gap. Understanding the common risks associated with master keys—and how to avoid them—helps eliminate potential problems while fine tuning the safety protocols around their use.

### Inadequate Key Storage

When considering how to manage keys, it is important to balance security with the need for convenient access. For example, stashing a key in a front-desk drawer—especially if there are gaps in coverage times due to staff shortages—is convenient, but this practice is a significant security risk. Hanging keys on a pegboard is also risky (even if the pegboard is in a locked room) due to the ease with which someone can swipe a master key from a hook.

At minimum, all keys should be secured in a lockbox. However, most lockboxes

require keeping track of a shared code or an additional key to access the keys inside, which is less convenient. They are also not secure if an unauthorized person gains access to the lockbox key or code. The best balance between convenience and security is an electronic key control system that locks keys in a secure drawer or wall-mounted panel and automatically authenticates employees with a unique login method for each user.

### Unreliable Record Keeping

Residence halls have multiple people who might need access to various areas of the buildings: full-time residence life employees, resident advisors (RAs), facilities personnel, campus law enforcement, contractors, and more. Maintaining accurate records of key assignments, checkouts, and returns is essential to security.

To prevent human error or manipulation, minimizing manual steps in the key control process is important. Rather than relying on

someone to check IDs and fill out a manual key log, technology can automatically authenticate employees and their access levels as well as record who removed a key and when.

### Improperly Managed Access Levels

Assigning access levels based on the responsibilities and roles of residents and staff members is important. Ensuring staff members can only access keys essential to their job functions helps prevent any misuse by individuals attempting to gain access to resident rooms for reasons unrelated to their assigned duties. For instance, RAs may be granted keys that can only be taken out for a limited period (e.g., two hours). This restriction helps maintain accountability and mitigates the potential for unauthorized entry into resident rooms.

By implementing a hierarchical key system and carefully assigning access levels, residential halls can safeguard their residents' security and privacy. Such measures minimize the risks associated with unauthorized access

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and ensure that only authorized personnel possess the necessary keys to carry out their designated responsibilities.

Managing master keys with an electronic key control system helps enforce access levels by automatically verifying each user when they log in to retrieve a specific key.

### Missing Keys

To avoid unauthorized access to student rooms, housing staff must be able to locate missing master keys promptly. Having a reliable way to find keys not only protects students and staff but reduces rekeying costs and wasted administrative time if the key turns up nearby where it fell out of someone's pocket or was distractedly left behind.

Two common technology solutions to this issue include:

#### 1. Bluetooth Trackers

A Bluetooth tracker helps the user locate missing keys by sending a signal from their

phone or other device. Attaching these small tags to master keys is a relatively inexpensive solution that can help housing, facilities, and campus police staff locate keys quickly. There are some limitations, though.

For example, certain tags will only work with specific device brands. Others can only control up to sixteen tags per account. Most only work up to a range of 200 to 390 feet. Some brands have a battery life of only a few months. In addition, Bluetooth trackers don't provide a foolproof way to see who has the key checked out, and employees may feel uncomfortable using their personal devices to track keys. Certain states, cities, or schools might also have security or privacy concerns surrounding location tracking. While Bluetooth trackers can be a feasible solution for smaller schools, larger schools will likely need to consider alternatives.

#### 2. Electronic Key Control Systems

With an electronic key control system, keys

are attached to tags that automatically record when a key is removed and who removed it. As a result, it is easy to see who has a key checked out, holding them accountable for that key. If someone fails to return a key within the allotted time, the system will send a text or email alert to designated people so they can contact whoever is responsible for the key. Since most systems' key tags are not equipped with location tracking, they don't present the same privacy concerns or range limitations as Bluetooth trackers.

Ultimately, the choice of technology solution should be based on the institution's specific needs and security considerations.

#### Employee Turnover

Like many other industries, higher education has suffered from increased turnover and resignation rates. According to the 2022 Higher Education Employee Retention Survey conducted by the College and University Professional Association for Human

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Resources, sixty-eight percent of full-time staff plan to look for other employment opportunities. In 2021, that figure was only twenty-four percent.

When employees leave, the remaining staff members spread themselves thin to fill in the gaps, making it easier for key control to fall through the cracks. To prevent turnover from becoming a security risk, managers must collect all keys, fobs, and access cards on the employee's last day and revoke their access privileges.

Routine key audits can identify missing keys and ensure employees still have the appropriate access privileges. Using an electronic key-control system makes this process easier through integrated, automatic reporting. In addition, user profiles make it easy to update a specific type of employee's access to specific keys.

When new employees start, integrating key-control best practices and security training into the onboarding process can help create a culture of security.



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### Solving Master Key Risks

To ensure students' safety, proper management of master keys is paramount. The risks associated with unsecured key storage, unreliable record keeping, improperly managed access levels, missing keys, and employee turnover highlight the need for effective key control. The right technology solution and proper protocol will balance convenience and security, automate record-keeping processes, enforce access levels, facilitate prompt location of missing keys, and streamline employee onboarding and turnover procedures. By following these best practices, campuses can create a culture of security around residence halls to give students much-needed assurance their safety is valued.



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Tricia Butler is a Senior Field Manager with KeyTrak, Inc. For more than two decades, she has helped some of the largest higher-education campuses across the western U.S. minimize key-management risks and operate more efficiently.

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