Rekeying versus replacing locks after a rental turnover

Making the right call for mailbox and unit locks

When a tenant moves out, the property manager or landlord faces a routine but important decision: what to do with the locks. The mailbox lock on the front of the building, the deadbolt on the apartment door, and sometimes a lock on a common-area gate all need to be secured for the next occupant. The two standard approaches are rekeying the existing hardware or replacing it entirely. Each has its place, and the choice depends on the condition of the lock, the type of key system in place, and what the property owner wants to achieve.

What rekeying involves

Rekeying means changing the internal pin combination of a lock so that the old keys no longer work, while the lock itself stays in place. A locksmith disassembles the cylinder, removes the old pins, and installs a new set that matches a different key. The result is a lock that looks the same from the outside but now responds only to the new key. The cost is lower than buying a whole new lock because the hardware, the trim, and the strike plate are reused. For a busy property with many units, that saving adds up fast.

Rekeying works best when the existing hardware is in good shape. If the lock turns smoothly, the cylinder is not worn, and the screws and mounting are solid, there is no reason to replace it. The same applies to mailbox locks: the small cam locks used in mailboxes can be rekeyed just like a door lock, provided the cylinder body is not damaged or corroded.

When replacement makes more sense

Replacement involves removing the old lock and installing a new one, often with a different keyway or even a different type of lock entirely. This is the right move when the existing lock is worn, damaged, or outdated. A deadbolt that sticks, a mailbox lock that jiggles, or a lock with a broken screw hole is not worth rekeying. The new hardware will operate more reliably and may come with features the old one lacked, such as a higher security grade or a keyway that is harder to pick.



Another reason to replace is a change in the master key system. If the property is switching to a different master key hierarchy, or if the current system has been compromised because too many keys are unaccounted for, installing new locks with a fresh keyway can reset security completely. Rekeying can also change the keyway, but that requires replacing the cylinder, which at that point is close to the cost of a new lock.

Mailbox lock replacement specifically

Mailbox locks see heavy use and are exposed to weather, dust, and sometimes vandalism. A mailbox lock that is hard to turn or that sticks in the locked position is a daily frustration for tenants and for the mail carrier. Rekeying can solve a lost-key problem, but if the lock mechanism itself is stiff or the cam is bent, replacement is the more durable fix. Many property managers opt to replace mailbox locks on a schedule, every few turnovers, to avoid mid-lease failures. The cost of a new mailbox lock is modest, and the time saved on service calls later is worth it.

Key systems and master keying

Properties with multiple units often use a master key system. The tenant gets a key that opens only their unit, while the property manager carries a master key that opens every unit and the common areas. Rekeying a single unit in a master key system is straightforward: the locksmith re-pins that lock to the next available change key code, and the master key still works. Replacing the lock requires ordering a cylinder that is keyed to the same master system, which

can take extra time and may cost more if the new lock is not compatible with the existing system.

For mailbox locks, the same logic applies. If the building has a master key for the mailboxes, the new or rekeyed lock must be pinned to match that master. A locksmith can do that on site for a rekey, but a replacement lock may need to be ordered pre-pinned unless the locksmith carries compatible cylinders. A professional locksmith like LocksmithGT handles both situations routinely, matching new hardware to an existing master key system.

Smart locks and electronic options

Some property owners consider upgrading to smart locks during a turnover. A smart lock replaces the traditional cylinder with an electronic latch that opens via a code, a fob, or a smartphone app. For a mailbox, there are electronic parcel locks that use a code or a key fob instead of a physical key. The advantage is no more rekeying: when a tenant moves out, the property manager simply deletes that code or fob from the system. The downside is the higher upfront cost, the need for batteries, and the possibility of electronic failure. For a single-family rental or a small building, a smart lock can be a good investment. For a large property with dozens of units, the cost and the complexity of managing many electronic locks may outweigh the convenience.



What to check before deciding

Before calling a locksmith, take a few minutes to inspect each lock that will be changed. Turn the key and feel for resistance. Look for rust, bent parts, or loose mounting screws. Check whether the key goes in and out smoothly. If the lock feels solid and operates quietly, rekeying is likely sufficient. If the lock feels gritty, wobbly, or difficult to turn, replacement will save future headaches. For mailbox locks, also check the alignment of the cam with the mailbox door: a misaligned cam can cause the door to pop open or fail to latch.

Logistics and timing

The turnover period is usually tight. The previous tenant has moved out, and the new tenant wants to move in. Rekeying can often be done on site in a few minutes per lock, so a locksmith can handle all the locks in one visit. Replacement takes longer because the old lock must be removed, the new one installed, and sometimes the hole in the door or mailbox needs adjustment. For a large number of units, scheduling the work a few days before the new move-in date gives a buffer for any fitting issues. Many property managers keep a few spare cylinders on hand for common door types, so a quick swap is possible without ordering.

Cost considerations without quoting prices

Rekeying uses less material and less labour than replacement, so it is generally the more economical option. Replacement adds the cost of the new hardware. Over the lifespan of a building, a mix of both strategies makes sense: rekey locks that are still in good condition, and replace those that are nearing the end of their service life. Trying to save money by rekeying a worn-out lock will only lead to a call back when the lock jams or breaks a few months later. On the other hand, replacing every lock at every turnover is unnecessary expense if the hardware is still working well.

A balanced approach for property managers

For a typical apartment building, a reasonable plan is to rekey all unit locks and mailbox locks at every turnover, and to replace any lock that shows signs of wear. Every three or four turnovers, replace the whole set of mailbox locks as a preventive measure. This keeps security tight without overspending. For common-area locks such as a lobby door or a laundry room, replacement may be less frequent because those locks see less abuse, but they should still be included in the master key update when the system changes.

Working with a locksmith

A good locksmith will assess each lock and give a recommendation. They can bring a selection of cylinders and keys to match the existing master system, saving a second trip. For properties with many units, it helps to have the keys for the current locks available during the appointment so the locksmith can verify the master key works before and after the work. Property managers who handle turnovers regularly often establish a relationship with a locksmith who knows the building's key system and can respond quickly. Services such as those offered by LocksmithGT provide the mobile support needed for last-minute turnover work, arriving with the tools and blanks required to rekey or replace locks on site.



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Security beyond the key

Changing the locks after a turnover is about more than just the physical key. It is about controlling who has access. A tenant who moved out may have made copies of the key, or a neighbour may have borrowed it. Rekeying or replacing resets the access list to zero. For high-security applications, such as a building with a history of theft or a unit that stores valuable equipment, replacement with a restricted keyway lock may be worth the extra cost. Restricted keyway locks can only be duplicated by an authorised locksmith, giving the property manager full control over key copies.

Final thoughts on the choice

Rekeying and replacement both have their place in rental turnover. The decision comes down to the condition of the lock, the type of key system, and the budget for the turnover. Rekeying is quick, affordable, and adequate for most situations. Replacement is necessary when the hardware is failing or when a higher level of security is desired. For mailbox locks, replacement is often the smarter long-term choice given their exposure to weather and frequent use. A property manager who understands the trade-offs can plan the turnover efficiently, keeping both the building secure and the new tenant satisfied.