

Lighting, Sightlines and Access: Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design for East Bay Rentals



Quick Answer

Crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED) means arranging a property so people can see and be seen, entry points are clear and controlled, and the place looks

cared for. For an existing East Bay rental, the lowest-cost steps are usually: exterior lights at entries, walkways, mail areas and parking that come on automatically at dusk; landscaping trimmed so it doesn't block views or create hiding spots (Oakland's residential CPTED checklist uses 2 feet for shrubs and 6 feet of clearance under tree canopies); and entry doors and gates that close and latch on their own. Check it before clocks fall back on Sunday, November 1, when Oakland's sunset moves from about 6:11 p.m. to about 5:10 p.m. Civil Code §1941.3 covers locks, not lighting. But a lighting problem you know about and don't fix can matter if something happens there.

Key Facts: Lighting, Sightlines and Access

What	The fact	Source
What CPTED is	A design approach built on three ideas: natural surveillance (lighting and sightlines), access control, and territorial reinforcement (clear boundaries and visible upkeep).	City of Oakland, Guidelines for CPTED
Oakland's landscaping guideline	Landscaping trimmed up to 2 feet off the ground; trees with 6 feet of clearance below the canopy.	Oakland CPTED checklist, multifamily residential · <i>Local guideline; used here as a voluntary self-audit</i>
Oakland's lighting items	Exterior doorways, walkways, building numbers, entries, recesses and corners lit; lights kept clear of trees; porch lights controlled by the owner or manager, not the apartment occupant.	Oakland CPTED checklist

What	The fact	Source
Lighting research	In a randomized New York City experiment, added lighting in public housing developments cut nighttime outdoor index crimes by at least 36%. A review of 13 street-lighting studies found an average 21% drop in crime, including in daytime; how the effect works is still unknown.	Chalfin et al., NBER w25798 (2019) ; College of Policing summary of Welsh & Farrington (2008)
When clocks fall back	Sunday, November 1, 2026. Oakland sunset: 6:26 p.m. on Oct 19, 6:11 p.m. on Oct 31, 5:10 p.m. on Nov 1, about 4:50 p.m. on Nov 30.	15 U.S.C. §260a ; sunrise-sunset.org (Oct) , (Nov)
What state law says	Civil Code §1941.3 requires specified locks, not lighting. The habitability statute lists “electrical lighting... maintained in good working order” among a dwelling’s standard characteristics.	Civil Code §1941.3 ; §1941.1(a)(5) · <i>Required by law; how §1941.1 applies to particular exterior fixtures is a question for an attorney</i>

Prefer video? Watch the 2-minute companion video below, or visit the [video page](#) with chapter timestamps and a full transcript.

[Rental Property Lighting: The Low-Cost Security Check East Bay Landlords Overlook](#)

Video Transcript

Want one of the lowest-cost ways to make a rental feel safer after dark? Look at the lights.

Security planners call this CPTED: crime prevention through environmental design. For an existing East Bay building it comes down to three questions. Can people see and be seen? Is it clear where the entrances are, and do the doors close and latch? Does the place look cared for?

Start with lighting. As a best practice, we recommend steady dusk-to-dawn lighting at entries, walkways, mail areas and parking. Oakland's own CPTED checklist also says to trim shrubs to about two feet and keep tree canopies at least six feet off the ground, so nobody has a place to wait out of view.

Timing matters this month. Clocks fall back on Sunday, November first, and sunset in Oakland jumps from about six ten to about five ten. Lights on a basic timer set for summer can be off when tenants are coming home. A photocell or an astronomic timer can adjust for the season automatically.

At AEBP, our tenants see the property after dark every night. We mostly see it in daylight. So we ask them to report any light that's out or a door that won't latch. We can only fix what we know about. And once someone reports it, we do know about it.

The full guide, with a walk-through checklist and five common questions, is linked below.

What CPTED Means for a Building You Already Own

CPTED (crime prevention through environmental design) is the idea that the physical layout of a place affects how easy it is to commit a crime there without being seen. For a new project, that shapes the design. For an existing East Bay rental, it mostly comes down to maintenance and a few targeted fixes: lights that work when it's dark, landscaping that doesn't hide anyone, and entrances that are obvious and close behind people.

This guide is the practical, owner's-side checklist. For what California law requires of landlords on locks and when a landlord can be liable for crime, see our [landlord security duties guide](#). For package rooms and mail areas, see our [package theft guide](#).

The Three CPTED Principles, Applied to East Bay Rentals

1. Natural surveillance: lighting and sightlines

People are less likely to try something where they can be seen. For a rental, that means lit entries, paths, mail areas and parking, and nothing blocking the view of them. Oakland's residential checklist asks whether the main entrance is at least partly visible from the street, whether ground-floor windows are clear of vegetation, and whether walkways are lit well enough to "distinguish form and movement." It also asks that porch lights be controlled by the owner or manager rather than by the occupant, so an entry doesn't go dark because one resident flipped a switch.

2. Access control: doors, gates and entries

Make it clear where people are supposed to enter, and make the entries close behind them. In older Oakland and Berkeley buildings, the common failures are small: a lobby door closer that no longer pulls the door shut, a side gate that doesn't latch, a garage gate that stays open long enough for someone to walk in. Civil Code §1941.3 requires locking mechanisms on common-area exterior doors in covered multifamily buildings, subject to the section's scope and exceptions. *Required by law.* Keeping the closers working so those locks actually engage is *strongly recommended best practice*.

3. Territorial reinforcement and maintenance

A property that looks cared for signals that someone is paying attention. Defined edges (plantings, paving changes, low walls or fences) show where public space ends. Prompt repair of broken fixtures and quick removal of graffiti and trash keep that signal intact. This is also the principle that costs the least, because most of it is ordinary upkeep.

After-Dark Walk-Through Checklist

Strongly recommended best practice and professional opinion, not a code inspection. Walk the property about an hour after sunset, the way a tenant comes home. Costs vary widely by building, so they're shown as relative tiers. Get quotes before deciding.

Area	What to look for after dark	Typical fix	Relative cost
Main entry and lobby door	Are the door, lock and keypad lit? Can you see the entry from the sidewalk?	Replace failed bulbs or fixtures; put the entry light on a dusk-to-dawn control; trim anything blocking the view	Low
Address numbers	Can a visitor or responder read them from the street at night?	Lit or reflective numbers. Oakland's checklist calls for 5-inch reflective numbers.	Lowest
Walkways, side paths and exterior stairs	Dark gaps between fixtures? Can you "distinguish form and movement" (Oakland's wording)?	Add or move fixtures; clear branches off existing lights	Low to moderate
Mail and package area	Is it lit when tenants pick up mail after work?	Dusk-to-dawn fixture; see our package theft guide for the rest	Low

Area	What to look for after dark	Typical fix	Relative cost
Parking, carports and garage	Dark corners? Does the garage gate close behind each car?	Brighter fixtures; light-colored paint on garage walls and ceilings (an Oakland checklist item); service gate closers and sensors	Moderate to higher
Side and rear doors, gates	Lit? Closing and latching on their own? Propped open?	Fixture or motion light; adjust closers; self-closing gate hardware	Low to moderate
Landscaping	Shrubs above about 2 feet by paths and windows; low tree branches; plants covering light fixtures	Trim to Oakland's 2-foot / 6-foot guideline and keep it on the gardener's schedule	Low, recurring
Lighting controls	Lights coming on well after dark, or going off before dawn? Timers still on summer settings?	Reset timers after Nov 1; consider replacing basic timers with photocells or astronomic timers	Low
Fences and property edges	Solid fences or walls that create blind spots? Unclear where public space ends?	When replacing, consider see-through fencing; define private areas with plantings, paving or low walls	Moderate to higher

Area	What to look for after dark	Typical fix	Relative cost
General upkeep	Broken fixtures, graffiti, trash, abandoned items	Prompt repair and cleanup	Low, ongoing

Before adding fixtures, changing doors or altering exit paths, have a licensed electrician or other qualified professional check applicable building, fire and accessibility requirements. Point new lights down and away from neighbors’ windows; glare can make it harder to see, not easier.

Why Lights Go Wrong Every Fall, and Which Controls Fix It

The answer first: lights on basic clock timers drift out of sync with sunset every fall, and the November clock change makes it worse. Oakland’s sunset is about 6:26 p.m. on October 19 and 6:11 p.m. on October 31. On Sunday, November 1, clocks fall back and sunset arrives at about 5:10 p.m. By the end of November it’s about 4:50 p.m. (sunrise-sunset.org). A timer set for long summer evenings can leave a walkway dark for an hour or more while tenants are coming home.

Control	How it decides	Fall and clock-change behavior	Best for
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Basic timer (mechanical or simple digital)	Turns on and off at set clock times	Doesn't follow sunset. Needs resetting as days shorten and after the clock change; a power outage can throw it off.	Rarely the best choice for entries and paths
Photocell (dusk-to-dawn sensor)	Turns on when it gets dark	Adjusts on its own	Entries, walkways, mail areas. A dirty or shaded sensor, or one sitting under another light, can misfire.
Astronomic timer	Calculates sunset and sunrise from the date and location	Adjusts on its own; confirm the location and daylight-saving settings at install	Controlling several fixtures from one place
Motion sensor	Turns on when it detects movement	Not affected	Side yards, rear doors, trash areas. Not a replacement for steady light along main paths.

Professional opinion: for entries, main paths and mail areas, a photocell or astronomic timer is usually worth the small upgrade over a basic timer, because it removes a twice-a-year reset that's easy to forget.

Does Better Lighting Actually Reduce Crime?

The evidence says it can help, with limits. In a randomized experiment across New York City public housing developments, temporary lighting towers reduced nighttime outdoor index crimes by at least 36% ([Chalfin, Hansen, Lerner and Parker, NBER Working Paper 25798, 2019](#)). A review of 13 street-lighting studies found crime fell by an average of 21% in areas with improved lighting, and in several studies it fell in daytime too, which suggests visible investment in a place may matter as well as visibility itself. The researchers say exactly how the effect works is still unknown ([College of Policing summary of Welsh and Farrington, 2008](#)).

For an owner, that supports lighting as a reasonable, low-cost layer. It doesn't support promising tenants a "safe" or "secure" building because the lights are on.

How Lighting Connects to Liability

A burned-out light is a small repair. It becomes a bigger issue when someone knows about it and it sits. As our [landlord security duties guide](#) explains, California courts weigh how foreseeable a harm was against the burden of preventing it. Replacing a bulb or a failed fixture is a small burden. A light that has been reported out, in an area where incidents have already happened, is the kind of gray area that guide's comparison table flags. *Case law; how it applies to a specific property is a question for an attorney.*

Strongly recommended best practice: log lighting reports the same way you log lock reports, with the date reported and the date fixed, and fix them promptly. A record that shows quick repairs is useful whatever happens next. Our [habitability guide](#) covers repair timelines more broadly.

Oakland's CPTED Checklist: A Free Audit Tool

The City of Oakland publishes [Guidelines for Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design](#) as three checklists: residential, commercial and civic. The [multifamily residential checklist](#) is a one-page list of yes/no questions, where every “no” marks something to improve. It's written for development projects, but it works well as a self-audit for an existing building anywhere in the East Bay. Items most relevant to an existing rental:

- Doorways that open to the outside are well lit, and the main entrance is at least partly visible from the street
- Sidewalks, yards and walkways are lit well enough to distinguish form and movement, with lights kept clear of trees and landscaping
- Landscaping trimmed up to 2 feet off the ground; trees with 6 feet of clearance below the canopy
- Building numbers, entries, recesses and corners are lit; the address is visible from the street with 5-inch reflective numbers
- Porch lights are controlled by the owner or manager, not the apartment occupant
- The parking garage is well lit, with light-colored walls and ceilings, and garage-to-building entries require a key or electronic access

What We See at AEBP

Our tenants see the property after dark every night; we mostly see it in daylight. So we rely on them to tell us what's wrong. Our October tenant newsletter asks residents to submit a maintenance request whenever an exterior light is out, flickering or on a timer that's no longer set right, and to report any front door, gate or lobby door that isn't latching on its own. The line we use with tenants: we can only fix what we know about.

Two things follow from that. First, a tenant report is notice. Once someone tells us an entry light is out or a lobby door won't latch, we know about it, and the clock is running. That's why

we treat a broken entry or lobby lock as an emergency, with a vendor sent the same day. *Company policy.* Second, making it easy for tenants to report is part of the security plan, not just customer service. If tenants don't know how to report a dark walkway, or don't think anyone will act on it, the problem stays invisible to the owner.

Owner Checklist Before Clocks Fall Back on November 1

- Walk the property about an hour after sunset, starting from the sidewalk
- Replace failed bulbs and fixtures at entries, walkways, mail areas and parking
- Reset basic timers, or replace them with photocells or astronomic timers
- Keep shrubs near paths and windows about 2 feet high, and maintain about 6 feet of clear space beneath tree canopies, following Oakland's CPTED guideline
- Check that lobby doors, side doors and gates close and latch on their own
- Make sure address numbers are visible from the street at night
- Remind tenants how to report a light that's out or a door that won't latch
- Log every lighting and door report with the date reported and the date fixed

Bottom Line

CPTED for an existing rental isn't a construction project. It's lights that come on when it's actually dark, landscaping that doesn't hide anyone, entries that close behind people, and a property that looks watched. Most of it is low-cost, and the best time to check is before clocks fall back on November 1. Use Oakland's checklist as a voluntary maintenance self-audit. If you plan alterations or permit work, ask the city whether project-specific CPTED review or other conditions apply. Either way, a lighting or door problem you've been told about and haven't fixed is the kind of thing that can matter later.

Frequently Asked Questions

What's the most cost-effective security upgrade for a multifamily rental?

It depends on the building, but in our professional opinion, working exterior lighting on automatic controls is often among the lowest-cost, highest-value steps, along with entry doors that close and latch. The research supports lighting as one useful layer: a randomized New York City experiment found at least a 36% drop in nighttime outdoor index crimes where lighting was added ([NBER w25798](#)). Those studies looked at public housing grounds and streets, not individual small buildings, so treat lighting as a deterrent layer, not a guarantee.

Are California landlords required to light common areas?

Civil Code §1941.3, the main building-security statute, covers locks, not lighting. California's habitability statute lists electrical lighting maintained in good working order among a dwelling's standard characteristics ([Civil Code §1941.1\(a\)\(5\)](#)); how that applies to particular exterior and common-area fixtures is a question for an attorney. Building and fire codes can separately require lighting along exit paths, so check with a licensed electrician or your local building department before changing them. And a lighting problem you know about can matter to liability, as our [landlord security duties guide](#) explains.

Why do exterior lights seem to fail in the fall?

Often they haven't failed. Days get shorter through October, and when clocks fall back on November 1, sunset in Oakland moves about an hour earlier, to around 5:10 p.m. A basic timer set for long summer evenings can leave entries and paths dark while tenants are coming home. Photocells and astronomic timers adjust automatically. A basic timer has to be reset.

Are motion-sensor lights or always-on lights better for a rental?

Best practice: use both, in different places. Steady dusk-to-dawn lighting works best at entries, main walkways, mail areas and parking, where tenants need to see where they're going. Motion-sensor lights suit side yards, rear doors and trash areas, where a sudden light draws attention. Oakland's CPTED checklist includes both.

Does CPTED apply to an existing building, or only to new construction?

Oakland's CPTED checklists are written for development projects; here, we use the residential checklist as a voluntary maintenance self-audit for an existing rental. If you plan alterations or permit work, ask the city whether project-specific CPTED review or other conditions apply. Most of what it asks about (lighting, trimmed landscaping, visible entries, clear address numbers) can be fixed in an existing building without construction.

Sources

- Oakland CPTED guidelines: [City of Oakland, Guidelines for Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design](#); [CPTED checklist, multifamily residential \(PDF\)](#)
- Lighting experiment: [Chalfin, Hansen, Lerner and Parker, "Reducing Crime Through Environmental Design: Evidence from a Randomized Experiment of Street Lighting in New York City," NBER Working Paper 25798, May 2019](#)
- Street-lighting review: [College of Policing, Crime Reduction Toolkit: Street lighting](#) (summarizing Welsh and Farrington, Campbell Collaboration, 2008)
- Required locks: *Required by law*. [California Civil Code §1941.3](#)
- Habitability standards: [California Civil Code §1941.1](#)
- Clock change: [15 U.S.C. §260a](#) (daylight saving time ends the first Sunday in November)
- Oakland sunset times: [sunrise-sunset.org, October 2026](#) and [November 2026](#)
- Tenant reporting practice, lock-repair policy and portfolio size: AEBP company practice and data

Want Help Keeping Your Building Lit and Latched?

We manage 600+ rental units across Oakland, Berkeley, Emeryville and the wider East Bay, with a 24/7 bilingual maintenance line for tenants to report problems. Let's talk about how your building handles lighting, doors and repair reports.

[Talk to an AEBP Property Manager →](#)

Source: <https://alleastbayproperties.com/crime-prevention-environmental-design-rental-property-east-bay/>