



HIGHTOWER

Westchester



Homeowner's Guide to Title Security and Squatter Prevention

Fraud is an escalating threat affecting Americans across all income levels. According to recent data from the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), consumers reported losses exceeding \$12.5 billion to fraud in 2024, a staggering 25% increase from the previous year.¹ The most commonly reported scams include imposter scams, online shopping fraud, and prize and sweepstakes schemes. These scams are especially prevalent due to the ease with which bad actors use social engineering tactics to create a false sense of legitimacy and deceive victims.

But there's another type of fraud that, while less frequent, can be devastating: real estate fraud. This form of fraud is on the rise and involves highly sophisticated schemes where scammers forge documents and impersonate property owners to gain control of real estate. Two major types of real estate fraud are:

- **Deed/Title Fraud:** where ownership documents are falsified to transfer property illegally.
- **Squatter Fraud:** where individuals unlawfully occupy a property and exploit legal loopholes to delay eviction.

Property owners must stay informed and vigilant to protect themselves from these threats. Whether it's preventing deed theft or dealing with squatters, understanding your rights and securing your property, both physically and legally, is essential. In the sections that follow, we'll break down these scams in detail and share key steps you can take to help safeguard your home and finances.

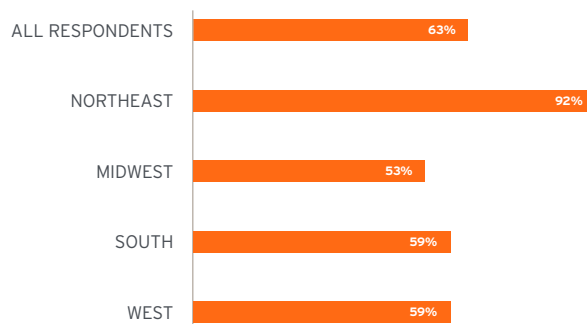
THE RISE OF DEED FRAUD

Title theft, also known as deed fraud, occurs when someone illegally transfers the ownership of a property without the rightful owner's knowledge or consent. Once the title is stolen, the fraudster can take out loans against the property, rent it out for profit, or even sell it, leaving the true owner to face the consequences. Reclaiming ownership often requires lengthy and expensive legal battles, which can be emotionally and financially draining.

This type of fraud is becoming more common across the U.S. In fact, over 50% of professionals surveyed by the National Association of REALTORS® reported awareness of title or deed fraud in their region between May 2024 and May 2025.² The report also revealed that the Northeast has seen the highest concentration of these cases.

As this threat continues to grow, homeowners must take proactive steps to protect their property rights. Here are some practical steps homeowners can take to reduce their risk and safeguard their ownership rights.

TITLE/DEED FRAUD IN PAST 12 MONTHS



In the past 12 months, are you aware of any instances of title fraud or deed theft in your state or area?

More than three in five respondents are aware of title fraud or deed theft that has occurred in their markets in just the past 12 months. This is most prevalent among respondents in the Northeast, at 92 percent.

4 STEPS TO HELP PROTECT YOURSELF FROM DEED FRAUD

01 KEEP TRACK OF ALL BILLS

One of the simplest yet most effective ways to detect suspicious activity involving your property is by regularly reviewing your routine bills, such as utility statements, mortgage notices, and property tax documents. Scammers often count on homeowners being inattentive to their mail and use deceptive tactics to intercept it. These tactics may include stealing bills directly from your mailbox or submitting fraudulent change-of-address requests to the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) to reroute your mail.

Once scammers gain access to your personal information, they may use it to forge legal documents, such as a quitclaim deed. A quitclaim deed is a legal instrument that transfers any ownership interest in a property from one person to another, without guaranteeing the validity of that interest. After forging such a document, scammers can file it with your county records office, making the fraudulent transfer appear legitimate and paving the way for further exploitation of your property.

To reduce the risk of mail theft, consider switching to paperless billing whenever possible. Many institutions offer billing via email or mobile apps, keeping your sensitive information out of the mailbox. If you prefer to receive physical mail, you can enroll in USPS Informed Delivery, a free service that sends you a daily email preview of the mail scheduled for delivery to your address. This allows you to monitor what should be arriving and helps you spot any discrepancies.

Finally, always remember to properly shred any bills or documents containing personal information before discarding them. This simple step helps prevent identity theft and keeps your data out of the wrong hands.

02 CHECK YOUR CREDIT REPORT

As part of maintaining your overall financial health, it's wise to review your credit report at least once or twice a year—ideally on an annual or bi-annual basis. Regular reviews help you stay informed about any changes or suspicious activity tied to your credit profile.

You can access your credit report from the three major credit bureaus, Equifax, Experian, and TransUnion. Each bureau offers free tools and services that include real-time credit monitoring. These services notify you of key updates, such as changes to your credit score or the opening of new accounts or loans in your name.

To take advantage of these tools, simply create an account directly on each bureau's website. Staying proactive with your credit monitoring can help you flag any suspicious activity related to your home and any other financial accounts that you have open.



03 VERIFY WHETHER YOU HAVE OWNER'S TITLE INSURANCE

When you purchased your home, you likely also purchased title insurance, especially if you took out a mortgage, as lenders typically require a lender's title policy. However, it's important to understand that this type of policy protects the lender's financial interest, not necessarily yours as the homeowner. It covers the lender in case any title defects or legal claims arise after the transaction closes, but it does not offer the same protection for you personally.

If you want coverage that protects your ownership rights, you need to purchase an owner's title insurance policy. This optional policy can help safeguard you against issues like undisclosed liens, errors in public records, or fraudulent claims to ownership. If you didn't purchase the policy at the time of closing, you still may be able to purchase it later in time, though this action may cause coverage limitations and be more expensive than if you did so at the initial time of closing. You can also purchase a policy if you refinance your home.

04 CHECK THE STATUS OF YOUR DEED

Much of the information related to your home, such as property tax assessments, liens, building permits, mortgage details, and deeds, is considered public record. This means anyone can access it. While public access promotes transparency in property ownership, it also opens the door for criminals to misuse that information, including forging fraudulent deeds to claim ownership of your property.

To protect yourself, it's important to regularly monitor the status of your deed. You can do this by visiting your local county recorder's office or register of deeds, either online or in person. Keeping an eye on your property records helps ensure that no unauthorized changes have been made and that your ownership rights remain secure.

THE RISE OF SQUATTING

Another major concern for property owners and the ownership of their homes is squatting. Squatting has been on the rise since the COVID-19 pandemic when states were more lenient about allowing renters who couldn't afford monthly payments to remain in their homes. Similar to deed fraud, once a person gains access to a property, it is hard to have them removed, as the process of eviction is handled in the civil courts as opposed to criminal courts. This means that authorities are unable to do much about someone living in your property unless the court has already ruled on the matter.

Squatters typically make their move by identifying properties that are or look vacant and then physically gain entry. This includes houses that are on the market, vacation homes, or other homes that may be in your investment portfolio. A squatter can also be a former tenant who has overstayed their lease or has been evicted yet refuses to move or pay.

Once they are in they can change the locks, which prevents the owner from gaining access. Like with deed fraud, they may create a fake document like a lease or mortgage document to legitimize their stay in your home. When they are finally removed, homeowners are usually met with the surprise that their home has been destroyed.

To avoid becoming a victim, homeowners must secure their home physically to prevent any break-ins. Below are four steps to help safeguard your home from unlawful inhabitants.

4 STEPS TO HELP PROTECT YOUR PROPERTY FROM SQUATTERS

01 SECURE ANY POINTS OF ENTRY

As previously mentioned, squatters often gain access to properties by identifying and exploiting weak entry points. This makes it essential for property owners to be proactive and thorough in securing their homes. Start by investing in well-engineered locks and deadbolts that are designed to resist tampering. Options like double-cylinder or vertical deadbolts with saw-resistant and anti-drill plates offer enhanced protection.

Don't overlook other potential access points such as windows and garage doors. These should be reinforced with secure locking mechanisms and regularly inspected for vulnerabilities.

Another commonly overlooked risk is the use of lockboxes. While convenient for granting access to guests, contractors, or real estate agents, lockboxes can also be a target for squatters. They may be broken open with tools or compromised if the code is easy to guess or if someone observes an authorized user entering it.

To mitigate this risk, choose a lockbox made from durable, tamper-resistant materials. Use a strong, unpredictable code and update it regularly to ensure that only current, authorized individuals have access. Placement is also key. Avoid mounting the lockbox in a highly visible location. Instead, consider positioning it on the side or back of the house, or concealing it behind a plant or decorative element to reduce visibility from the street.

02 MAKE YOUR HOME LOOK OCCUPIED

Squatters often target homes that appear to be vacant for extended periods. One of the most effective ways to deter them is by making your property look consistently occupied. Even if you don't live there full-time, there are several strategies you can implement to create the illusion of regular activity. For example, leave a car parked in the driveway, keep a TV or radio on at intervals, and use smart home technology to set timers on interior and exterior lights.

In addition to simulating occupancy, maintaining the property's exterior is crucial. A well-kept home signals that someone is actively managing the space. This includes routine landscaping, snow removal, and making sure that mail or packages don't accumulate. Installing motion-sensor lights around entry points and walkways also can help deter trespassers by drawing attention to any movement around the property.

For added protection, consider enlisting a trusted neighbor or property management service to check in on the home periodically. Their presence can further reinforce the impression that the property is being watched and cared for regularly.





03 PURCHASE A SECURITY SYSTEM

Installing security cameras and alarm systems is a highly effective way to deter potential squatters from targeting your property. These devices serve as both a physical barrier and a psychological deterrent, clearly signaling that the home is actively monitored and protected. Visible cameras can discourage trespassers before they even approach the property.

Many security companies also provide yard signs and window decals that indicate the presence of a surveillance or alarm system. Displaying these prominently can further reinforce the message that the property is under watch, even if the systems are not immediately visible. Consider placing signs near entry points and in areas easily seen from the street to maximize their impact.

For added protection, opt for systems that offer remote monitoring and mobile alerts, allowing you to respond quickly to any suspicious activity. Integrating smart home technology can also help you manage security more efficiently, especially if the property is vacant for long periods.

04 CONSIDER TURNING OFF UTILITIES ON VACANT PROPERTIES

If your property is expected to remain vacant for an extended period, consider turning off the utilities—such as water, gas, and electricity. This can serve as a practical deterrent to squatters, as a home without basic services is far less appealing to inhabit. Additionally, suspending utilities can help reduce ongoing costs while the property is unoccupied.

However, it's important to be cautious before doing so. If squatters have already taken residence in the property, turning off utilities may be considered a form of “self-help” eviction, which is illegal in many states. In such cases, you could face fines or even be required to compensate the squatters. This rule is especially relevant when dealing with tenants who have overstayed their lease or are refusing to vacate.

Moreover, shutting off utilities after someone has moved in could inadvertently strengthen their claim to the property. In some jurisdictions, squatters may attempt to establish residency by setting up utility accounts in their own name. This can complicate the legal process of removing them, as it may be used to argue for tenant rights or even ownership.

Before taking action, consult with a legal professional or local housing authority to make sure you're complying with state laws and protecting your rights as a property owner.



conclusion

Unfortunately, fraud and scams have become increasingly common, especially as personally identifiable information (PII) is frequently exposed in data breaches. Combined with the fact that many personal details are publicly available, scammers can easily build profiles and target individuals' assets for their own gain.

However, falling victim to fraud is not inevitable. With the right education and awareness, particularly around risks like deed fraud and squatting, you can take meaningful steps to help protect yourself and your property. If you're concerned about safeguarding your real estate assets, now is an ideal time to speak with a financial advisor. While they may not assist with physical security measures, they can provide critical legal and financial guidance.

This support is especially valuable if you've recently inherited property or been named a beneficiary following the death of a loved one. In such cases, a financial advisor can collaborate with estate attorneys to ensure the deed is properly recorded and monitored. This helps prevent criminals from fraudulently transferring ownership or exploiting legal loopholes to claim the property.

Don't wait until fraud occurs. Reach out to your advisor to discuss proactive strategies to help protect your assets. Their knowledge can be a powerful tool in navigating complex legal processes and ensuring your property remains secure.



HIGHTOWER

Westchester

**440 MAMARONECK AVENUE, SUITE 506
HARRISON, NY 10528
(914) 825-8630
HIGHTOWERWESTCHESTER.COM**

¹ New FTC data show a big jump in reported losses to fraud to \$12.5 billion in 2024. (2025, July 31). Federal Trade Commission. <https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/news/press-releases/2025/03/new-ftc-data-show-big-jump-reported-losses-fraud-125-billion-2024>

² Deed and Title Fraud Survey. (2025, May 29). <https://www.nar.realtor/research-and-statistics/research-reports/deed-and-title-fraud-survey>

Hightower Advisors, LLC is an SEC registered investment advisor. Securities are offered through Hightower Securities, LLC, Member FINRA/SIPC. All information referenced herein is from sources believed to be reliable. Hightower Advisors, LLC has not independently verified the accuracy or completeness of the information contained in this document. Hightower Advisors, LLC or any of its affiliates make no representations or warranties, express or implied, as to the accuracy or completeness of the information or for statements or errors or omissions, or results obtained from the use of this information. Hightower Advisors, LLC or any of its affiliates assume no liability for any action made or taken in reliance on or relating in any way to the information. This document and the materials contained herein were created for informational purposes only; the opinions expressed are solely those of the author(s), and do not represent those of Hightower Advisors, LLC or any of its affiliates. Hightower Advisors, LLC or any of its affiliates do not provide tax or legal advice. This material was not intended or written to be used or presented to any entity as tax or legal advice. Clients are urged to consult their tax and/or legal advisor for related questions.