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## How to find a hidden camera planted by your landlord, Airbnb host, or another creep

BY EVELYN BATTAGLIA | SEPTEMBER 21, 2020 - 1:30PM



Tiny cameras with pinhole lenses can be hidden anywhere, including overhead lighting.

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**Renting a new apartment? It may be scary to contemplate, but there's lots of places for** someone to plant a hidden camera and secretly record your every move for their own sick pleasure.

It doesn't happen frequently, but it does happen. Consider the case against Nest (<https://nypost.com/2019/01/12/i-found-hidden-cameras-in-my-brothers-apartment-suit/>) filed by Canadian Gordon Flatt who discovered three hidden cameras while staying in his brother's Manhattan apartment, including one behind a bed's headboard. (Nest, ([https://store.google.com/us/category/connected\\_home?hl=en-US&GoogleNest&utm\\_source=nest\\_redirect&utm\\_medium=google\\_oo&utm\\_campaign=GS1027](https://store.google.com/us/category/connected_home?hl=en-US&GoogleNest&utm_source=nest_redirect&utm_medium=google_oo&utm_campaign=GS1027)) maker of the devices, refused to identify the person who set up a one-month subscription).

Or the case of nanny Vanessa Rivas, who sued the couple she worked for (<https://nypost.com/2019/01/19/this-nanny-is-taking-on-cops-prosecutors-after-finding-boss-spycam-in-bathroom/>) after finding a hidden camera in one of their bathrooms where she showered and changed. There's also been a rash of spy cam incidents at Airbnb rentals (<https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2019/03/what-happens-when-you-find-cameras-your-airbnb/585007/>) across the world.

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*[Editor's Note: An earlier version of this article was published in September 2019. We are presenting it again with updated information for September 2020.]*

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“Hidden cameras are an epidemic in NYC, and people don't even realize how bad it is,” says Jimmie Mesis, owner of USA Bug Sweeps (<https://www.tscm.nyc/jimmie-mesis/>), which specializes in finding hidden cameras in NYC apartments.

He says he's busier than ever in the pandemic—even when New York City was locked down. “People are still spying on each other, he says.

Typical cases involve a young, single woman renting an apartment, but any type of housing is susceptible. The places where you can hide a bug are seemingly endless—such as vents, ceiling fans, and fire detectors. “No one is free from being watched,” he says.

Here's the advice Mesis gives for how to detect a spy cam and what to do if you find one.

## How can I tell if I am being spied on?

Start by being aware of your surroundings, Mesis says. Take inventory (or photos) of your belongings and pay attention to where everything is so you can tell if anyone has been in the apartment without your knowledge or, even if they have, whether anything has been moved. (This is a very good reason to declutter ([https://www.brickunderground.com/blog/2015/04/marie\\_kondo\\_your\\_life\\_the\\_youtube\\_way](https://www.brickunderground.com/blog/2015/04/marie_kondo_your_life_the_youtube_way))).



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Of course, if you have roommates, kids, or pets, your stuff is going to get moved around, but it's still worth being more mindful of your environment.

## How is someone able to spy on me?

“Hidden cameras can be anywhere and look like almost anything,” Mesis says. Searching on Amazon confirms that, with wireless “nanny cams” disguised as a smoke detector, light bulb, electronic outlet, or clock radio. (Other sites offer spy cams in the way of shower gel or a sonic toothbrush.)

Plus there are tiny cameras with a pinhole lens (as in less than 1/16th of an inch) that can be planted practically anywhere, including coffee makers and clock radios or any other electronic gizmo (so beware of any unexpected gifts).

Mesis has even found hard-wired cameras placed by landlords, which do not emit a signal and are therefore easier to escape detection (the closer your apartment is to theirs, the easier these devices will be to rig up). “All the wiring and sometimes even the body of the camera will be

on the other side of your wall or ceiling, so you'd have to look mighty hard to see the pinhole lens."

(Note: There's a federal law prohibiting the sale and use of devices designed to covertly record the voices of people without their consent, so most won't record audio.)

## How can I tell if I am being spied on?

Amateurs will often make it easy for you to find a camera simply by looking for one. But Mesis says a true voyeur will hide the camera so well you can be staring right at it and not even see it.

Short of combing every inch of your apartment, Mesis recommends focusing on the most common target spots, meaning bedrooms, bathrooms, and anywhere else you are likely to be caught undressed.

Within those spaces, he says to consider the angle of the camera. So as you are lying in bed look at what is pointed down at you, which could be a ceiling fan or pendant light or smoke detector.

In a bathroom, exhaust fans and heating vents are the most probable areas, as is anywhere below eye level where you wouldn't naturally bend down to look. (For example, someone could place a DVR camera under a pedestal sink and then come back and remove it a couple days later.)

Of course cameras can also be hidden wherever there is a hole for the lens to peep through. For a low-tech method, Mesis suggests turning off all the lights, drawing the blinds, and "painting the walls and ceiling and other surfaces with a flashlight, getting extremely close so you can detect any glint from the lens."

There are also lens-finding apps like Glint Finder (<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.workshop512.glintfinder&hl=en>) (free with ads for Androids) and Hidden Camera Detector (<https://www.hcdapp.com/>) (free for iPhones, \$4 for Android) that use your smartphone's flash to light up any lens, though you'll want to pay attention to user reviews before going this route.

Another option is a bug detector from Brickhouse Security (<https://www.brickhousesecurity.com/counter-surveillance/personal-bug/>) (no relation to Brick Underground), which starts at about \$195 and is roughly the size and shape of a deck of cards. This device claims to detect wired and wireless mics, cameras, and bugs, and comes with a camera detector attachment, which allows you to see any devices through a special lens, thanks to its emission of a high-frequency red light. (It's also an on-the-go option for dressing rooms, public bathrooms, and hotel rooms.)

“With any of these lens finders, you have to know what you are looking for, and therein lies the problem,” says Messi. Plastic, mirrors, glass, and other surfaces can give off false positive results.

Camera finders with RF (radio frequency) detection are typically cheaper (this one (<https://www.brickhousesecurity.com/counter-surveillance/camera-finder-rf/>) is \$85), though you'll need to turn off or rule out all the other transmitting objects, including kitchen appliances and baby monitors, in the home to hone in on any hidden camera.

To hunt down cameras that are streaming live video, apps such as Fing (<https://www.fing.com/>) will list all devices running off your network; Hidden Camera Detector scans local networks and Bluetooth as well.

Problem is, the perpetrator could set up a seemingly legit wifi router, say calling it 4B when you live in 2A, which wouldn't stand out as being suspicious. (Such was the case of a recent client whose ex-husband planted seven Nest cameras all over the apartment. “He did an excellent job of hiding them despite their size,” Mesis says.)

## When to call in a pro

Just because you fail to discover anything by all the above doesn't mean there isn't a camera still lurking somewhere. At this point you can just stop doing anything you wouldn't want anyone to see (unlikely) or hire a professional bug sweep. Be prepared to pay \$1,750 minimum.

(On the flip side, Messi has been hired by clients who swear they found a hidden camera on their own, only to turn out not to be the case. It's a tricky situation for sure.)

“A properly conducted debugging inspection of an average size apartment is not cheap,” Mesis says. “I am using over \$200,000 worth of state-of-the-art equipment, including an analyzer that not only detects the exact frequency but also the exact distance.”

## **What should I do if I find a hidden camera?**

Don't touch it and immediately call the police, who will dust the equipment for fingerprints and, if they're able to find any clues about the owner's identity, will try to track them down. Avoid alerting the landlord or super what you're up to, in case either one put it there in the first place.

Mesis has also had clients who choose to avoid bringing in the authorities, either to avoid dragging the person (usually a spouse or boyfriend) through court or to protect their own privacy, because what's on the video might end up being shown in court. He still suggests documenting where and when you found the camera and keeping it as evidence just in case.

## **Can I hide cameras in my own apartment?**

Under New York state law, it's legal to have a hidden camera in your dwelling, so long as it is not in an area where there is an expectation of privacy. (A good rule of thumb is not to put a camera anywhere you would expect someone to knock before entering).

Indeed, Mesis recommends installing cameras precisely to keep someone from spying on you, aiming them at all entry points.

One of the more popular options is the Nest Cam Indoor from Google ([https://store.google.com/us/product/nest\\_cam?hl=en-US](https://store.google.com/us/product/nest_cam?hl=en-US)) for \$130 (a five-pack ([https://store.google.com/us/config/nest\\_cam\\_bundle?hl=en-US](https://store.google.com/us/config/nest_cam_bundle?hl=en-US)) is \$575).

Brickhouse Security (<https://www.brickhousesecurity.com/security-cameras/best/?sort=bestselling&page=5>) sells surveillance cameras that range in price from \$130 to more elaborate devices that cost just over \$2,000 and features like low-light sensitivity and a zoom lens.

## **What are the penalties for spying on someone?**

Planting a hidden camera could get your landlord or any other offender slapped with trespassing and stalking charges.

The governing statute, known as Stephanie's Law, was enacted in 2003 as the result of a case involving a woman who had been spied on for months by her landlord (cameras were concealed in her apartment's smoke alarms). At the time the landlord could only be charged with misdemeanor trespassing, today it is considered a felony.

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