



Copper Theft

How Problematic is Copper Theft?

Thefts are more frequent in Sunbelt states where Air Conditioning (A/C) units are more numerous. Yet the problem appears to be national and widespread. The Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries notes that scrap metal dealers handled more than \$86 billion worth of scrap metal in 2008, the most recent year for which data is available. While there is no way to tell how much of this copper is stolen property, law enforcement around the country estimates that 25% of a scrap dealer's *total* scrap inventory is stolen property. Once copper is recycled it is difficult, if next to impossible, to trace because most of it has no identifiable markings.

Why is Copper Being Stolen?

- Scrap metal prices are increasing due to high manufacturing and construction demand in emerging markets.
- It takes less than 5 minutes for a thief to open up a small A/C unit and take \$20 worth of copper. The more work or time a thief has to put in to get the copper, the less attractive it is to them.

What Type of Copper is Being Stolen?

- Copper Coil (Inside A/C condenser)
- Copper Line Sets (A/C refrigerant)
- Copper Wire (power supply, communications)
- Copper Piping (plumbing)
- Copper down Spouts
- Entire A/C Condenser Units

By far, the most prevalent thefts for commercial and residential buildings is the copper coil and copper wiring inside small A/C units located outside these buildings.

Examples of Targeted Locations

- Apartments
- Buildings under construction on unsecured work sites (no fencing, no lighting, no security guard, etc.)
- Businesses with predictable operating hours
- Churches (including Day Cares at these locations)
- Concealed Installations (for any occupancy class)
- Libraries
- Schools
- Unprotected, easy access properties
- Unsupervised Municipal Locations
- Vacant Buildings

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Time-of-Day Occurrence

Thefts usually take place at night, and business owners and home owners discover the theft the next morning. In some instances, it's not discovered until a week or two later. Police say culprits are often repeat offenders. Sometimes they steal an air conditioner and, when it is replaced, they come back for the new one.

Property Perils Arising from Copper Theft

- Fires, although uncommon, have been started by thieves cutting wires and leaving them in close contact with combustibles.
- Flooding, when plumbing pipe is cut.
- Electrocution and burns to unknowing property owners or tenants who touch live wires.
- Lost business income from the lack of a working A/C unit.

Loss Prevention Solutions

- **Relocate the condenser to an inaccessible rooftop area.** Make sure a thief is not able to use a ladder or climb a tree near the building to get on top.
- **Install a steel cage around new and existing A/C units.** The heavier the metal used on the cage, the longer it takes to get to the A/C condenser. For instance, a heavy steel cage (10-12 gauge) takes 1-2 hours to cut through. Rebar cages are not very effective, as they can be quickly and easily cut with bolt/lock cutters.
- **Have an A/C contractor install an alarm system on the A/C condenser.** The alarm will trigger when refrigerant lines are cut, power is lost to the unit or electrical wires are cut. They can be installed as a stand-alone exterior local alarm or tied into a central alarm monitoring system.
- **A surveillance camera will deter some thieves,** but will not stop all of them. Cameras are also good for collecting evidence of the theft.
- **Install copper line sets directly into the building,** instead of on an open rooftop, under a crawlspace or on the ground.
- **Install flood lights with motion sensors.**
- **Remove fixed exterior ladders or stairs. Do not remove the fire escape!**
- **Store extension ladders inside a locked building.**
- **Ask local police to patrol your property during off hours.**
- **Some businesses with a high frequency of theft are now using products for marking their copper.** These are small pieces of material encoded with serial numbers that identify the stolen property. While this measure doesn't prevent theft, it may help in the recovery of stolen items.

For more information on safeguarding your business, please contact your local Risk Management Representative or visit us at www.uticanational.com.

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