

# HAZARD GUIDE COPPER THEFT

## Overview

## When and Where Theft Occurs

## Property Perils

## Loss Prevention Tips

### Overview

Thefts are more frequent in Sunbelt states where A/C units are numerous, but the problem appears to be national and widespread. According to the Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries, scrap metal dealers handled over \$86 billion worth of scrap metal in 2008, the latest year that data is available. While there is no way to tell how much of this copper is stolen property, law enforcement around the country estimate 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 ID 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 more time a thief has to put into to get the copper, the less attractive it is to them.

### Types of Copper Being Stolen

- Copper coil (inside A/C condenser)
- Cooper 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.

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#### Examples of Targeted Locations

- Churches (including day cares at these locations)
- Libraries
- Schools
- Vacant buildings
- Apartments
- Farms (crop irrigation)
- Scrap recycling facilities
- Unsupervised municipal locations
- Concealed installations (for any occupancy class)
- Unprotected, easy access properties
- Businesses with predictable operating hours
- Buildings under construction on unsecured work sites (no fencing, no lighting, no security guard, etc.)

#### Time of Day Occurrence

Thefts usually take place at night, and the business owners and home owners discover it missing 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.

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



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- ▶ Relocate the condenser to a rooftop as long as it is inaccessible from the exterior. A thief should not be 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 completely. They are also effective for collecting evidence of the theft.
- ▶ On installations, run copper line sets into the building, instead of on an open rooftop, under a crawlspace, or on the ground.
- ▶ Motion sensor/flood lights deter thieves.
- ▶ Remove fixed, exterior ladders or stairs (do not remove fire escape)
- ▶ Store extension ladders inside a locked building.
- ▶ Ask local police if they would patrol your property during off hours.
- ▶ A small number of commercial businesses with a high frequency of theft are starting to use a product for marking their copper with Datadots. These are small pieces of material encoded with serial numbers that identify the stolen property.

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