



Metal Theft

Pocket Guide

Personal

Professional

Protective

Thefts of metal including cable, lead and copper have increased in Northern Ireland. Over recent years the price of metal has risen considerably driven by various global economies and increased demand. This guide provides an overview on the issue for all police officers.

What metal is being stolen?

No metal is immune from being stolen; but a combination of value, demand, quantity, uses and ease of theft makes some metals more prone than others. Specific metals being targeted are:

- Copper (electrical uses)
- Lead (waterproof flashings on buildings)
- Iron and steel (construction industries)
- Aluminium (construction, electrical uses)
- Platinum and other valuable metals (used in catalytic converters)

Where is the metal being stolen from?

Locations being targeted by metal thieves include:

- Railway lines and infrastructure
- Electricity high voltage sub-stations and electricity pylons
- Telecommunication systems and communication masts
- Water and sewage works
- Hospitals and schools
- Residential properties and building sites
- Scrap yards
- Storage yards, depots, builders' yards and merchants
- Stately homes and other historical sites
- Cemeteries and war memorials
- Farms
- Churches

Who is committing these offences?

There is no one group in particular committing these offences. Thefts range from local offenders to more organised groups. Intelligence also suggests that some offences are committed or facilitated by workers within targeted industries.

What is the impact?

Dependent upon the victim/location of the theft, the potential impact varies:

- Trains and other transport may be stopped and delayed
- Sporting and music events may be interrupted or cancelled
- Domestic supplies may be cut off
- Telecommunications (including emergency services) may be disrupted
- Industry may be stopped (loss of electricity, gas or water services)
- Schools and hospitals may be affected

What can you do?

There are a number of tell-tale signs that metal theft may be taking place. Below are some specific pointers to look out for:

- Unmarked vehicles at or near construction or building sites. Most organisations have marked vehicles with visible company details, although some smaller companies or individual workers may not. Be aware that in some cases thieves can mark bogus vehicles with company livery.
- Work taking place on construction or building sites outside of normal working hours.
- Non-uniform personnel on the railway.
- Bogus road works may be set up to remove cable from the ground.
- Unlocked access gates into a building, construction or railway site without any clear work taking place should always be looked into.
- Staff working on electrical compounds and other types of infrastructure will probably be doing so at recognised work times with recognised safety equipment.
- Many electrical compounds are not routinely staffed. If personnel are seen on site make contact to ascertain their legitimacy for being there.
- Reports of black or acrid smoke. This can be a signal that offenders are burning the sheath off cable, as they get a greater price when sold if the sheath is no longer on the cable.
- Engage with the local community around building and construction sites. Encourage them to report any suspicious activity, particularly outside of operational hours.
- Liaise with the site operators to understand the scope of operation such as times of work and any major deliveries of materials that could be attractive to thieves.

- Visit the sites outside of operational hours to ascertain if any activity is taking place. A police presence may disrupt criminal activity.
- Check the site boundary to look for any signs of pre-cursor activity for theft, e.g. damaged fencing or gates. Thieves have used markers on fences such as drink cans and old clothes to indicate an area with cable that is vulnerable to theft.
- It is also known that some burglars and thieves have used, and are using, graffiti style signs on infrastructure and pathways to indicate where there is cable or metal suitable for stealing.
- Pay attention to vacant houses where copper can be targeted.
- Watch out for metal being transported at unusual times of day and in suspicious circumstances.

Health and safety considerations

Many of the sites mentioned within this document have inherent dangers, such as moving trains on the railway and danger of electrocution in electricity sub-stations. Pre arranged visits should be properly conducted by the person in charge of the site who will be responsible for visitors' health and safety. In advance of entering such premises in an operational situation you should consider how you can familiarise themselves with likely risks and should take your own health and safety into account when assessing the need for immediate, unaccompanied entry.

Conclusions

The effects of metal theft are wide reaching with impacts felt by industry and by the local community. From transport delays and power cuts, to local thefts from community churches and an overall spike on the global metal markets. It is vital that you are aware of the issues and take action accordingly.

Police Service of Northern Ireland

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