

Preventing Household Fixture Metal Theft

By Rick Arrington-CPS, NCPS II

It is an unfortunate fact that criminals often prey on those who are already in distressed circumstances. They seek easy opportunities where they are less likely to be detected or encounter substantial resistance. Criminals choose their victims based upon: the amount of the reward, the amount of effort required and the degree of risk anticipated.¹ So it is reasonable to expect that criminals looking for easy marks would be trying to capitalize on the recession-driven increases in vacant and foreclosed properties. Indeed, already crimes associated with home foreclosures are being identified. Criminals enter the homes and clean them out of any remaining valuables, virtually undetected. If no easily removable valuables are found, the product of choice that may be easily and quickly converted to cash is copper. Copper pipes and wiring are being removed, leaving foreclosed homes in need of costly repairs and worth a fraction of their pre-stripped value. Recently the trend toward the theft of copper and aluminum has extended to homes that may be vacant during the day, offices and even churches. Churches in have seen an increase in victimization over the last several months. Ministers and congregants are finding entire heat pumps missing when they arrive to worship. Most estimates indicate that the price of copper has tripled over a few short years. A quick trip to the scrap yard can net the thief rich dividends for his criminal work.

What can be done to address these crime problems? The criminal justice system needs to react quickly. But the prevention and intervention steps will require more than just the police. As a past law enforcement manager and crime prevention specialist who has seen the power of community and police working together, the answer lies in partnerships. The efforts will take the community, businesses, families and government involvement to head off this problem before it becomes too large. All of these crimes may be addressed if we seek ways to ensure that criminals will be detected and limit any proceeds or benefits they might gain from their crimes. For example, citizen's groups and police patrols may be used to regularly monitor vacant homes, churches and businesses in their neighborhoods. Additionally, legitimate scrap metal dealers should be asked to assist. In fact, the scrap industry is actively addressing the problem themselves. The Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries Inc. (ISRI) has published documents for recyclers that encourage them to work with local law enforcement officials to share information. The suggested process includes law enforcement alerts to recyclers when thefts occur, with descriptions of what items may be offered for sale. Recently the ISRI has created www.ScrapTheftAlert.com, which is a tool for law enforcement that allows officers to alert the scrap industry of significant thefts of materials in the United States and Canada. Upon validation and review, alerts posted are broadcast by email to all subscribed users within a 100 mile radius of where the incident occurred. Recyclers should in-turn identify sellers of scrap metal, create an account of transactions with them and make the information available to law enforcement. Some other recommended steps include requiring that all scrap be paid for by check, to assist in tracking transactions and to discourage illegal sales.²

While voluntary cooperation is always desired, in Virginia state law provides law enforcement specific tools to head off this phenomenon by mandating certain processes with regard to scrap metal. One statute prohibits scrap processors from purchasing scrap metal of any kind from minors.³ Another requires processors to report the

¹ Clarke, Ron V. 1997. *Situational Crime Prevention-Successful Case Studies* (2nd ed.). Guilderland, NY: Harrow and Heston

² *Recommended Practices and Procedures for Minimizing the Risks of Purchasing Stolen Materials*, www.isri.org. Washington, DC

³ § 59.1-136.4, *Code of Virginia*

purchases of nonferrous scrap metal (that which is not steel or iron) to law enforcement, if requested.⁴ One step toward limiting theft from foreclosed and vacant buildings is the requirement that anyone dealing in secondhand building fixtures, specifically plumbing, heating and wiring, be required to obtain a permit to do so from the Sheriff or Chief of Police of the locality.⁵

Virginia law enforcement has the tools to combat the stripping of metals through the reduction of rewards to those illegally engaged in scrap metal selling, as well as providing requirements for scrap dealers to facilitate the detection and prosecution of these criminals. In addition, scrap metal processors purchasing nonferrous scrap, metal articles, and proprietary articles from any person who is not an authorized scrap seller must, at the time of sale, require the seller to produce a government issued photographic identification. The processor must also record the seller's identification information, as well as the time and date of the transaction, the license number of the seller's vehicle, and a description of the items received from the seller. A permanent ledger of this information must be maintained at the scrap metal processor's place of business and made available for inspection to any law-enforcement official.⁶

There are other techniques to help limit the opportunity for the theft of copper and aluminum wiring and pipes. To prevent the stripping of air conditioning units of their copper coils, property owners may enclose their unit in a wire cage or padlock their power disconnect box with a quality disc type padlock. This type of lock makes it difficult, if not impossible to cut the lock. Home improvement stores offer many brands of these locks for under \$20. Other recommendations include securing crawl spaces with access to pipes and wiring, increasing the security of housings and coverings with tamper resistant screws, leaving the electric current on in vacated buildings, leaving certain lights on and making law enforcement officials aware of the building's status.



Anything that can be done to limit the reward and make the theft more difficult will substantially reduce the probability of victimization. Local crime prevention practitioners and law enforcement officers, sound prevention techniques, and Virginia statutes are all essential to creating a coordinated, effective barrier to household fixture metal theft.

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⁴ § 59.1-136.5, *Code of Virginia*

⁵ § 59.1-117, *Code of Virginia*

⁶ § 59.1-136.3, *Code of Virginia*