



# Research in Practice

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## Strategies for preventing scrap metal theft

Scrap metal theft is a lucrative and attractive venture for thieves and a significant issue for the construction industry (Jones 2008). It appears to be facilitated by a largely unregulated scrap metal recycling industry, the relative ease of theft due to the openness and accessibility of construction sites, and encouraged by escalating metal prices. The price of copper, for example, has doubled since 2005.

The costs of scrap metal theft are substantial. The UK Home Office estimates that scrap metal theft costs the UK £360m each year ('Copper thieves in the eyes of new metal detectors' *Professional Engineering* 22(1): 7). Not only does it place additional financial burdens on construction companies who have to replace the materials, it also impacts on the broader community by affecting utilities such as electrical and telecommunications systems and even the railways (Bush 2009). The cost for thieves can also be significant as incidences of injuries such as burns and fatalities are high.

Traditionally, construction companies have responded to scrap metal theft by introducing and enforcing access control measures, such as CCTV and electrified fences. However, these strategies may have a relatively limited effect, especially when the theft is an 'inside job', perpetrated by someone working on a construction site (Boba & Santos 2008).

### Considerations for the prevention of scrap metal theft

The following strategies are identified as some of the possible measures designed to prevent scrap metal theft.

- *Multi-agency cooperation*—the police, construction and scrap metal recycling industries need to work together in order to pool resources and create a multifaceted approach to scrap metal theft (Bush 2009; Jones 2008; Kooi 2010). For instance, the police could instruct recycling personnel on how to identify suspicious sellers. A number of multi-agency approaches that have been implemented in the United States appear to have been effective in
- reducing scrap metal theft (Bush 2009). For example, the Macon/Middle George Metal Theft Committee located in Georgia (United States) is comprised of representatives from local utilities and recycling plants, the construction industry and the police. The committee meets on a regular basis to train members on theft prevention techniques and swap information about local incidences of scrap metal theft. Within three months of its implementation, copper theft had been reduced by 90 percent (Bush 2009).
- *Information sharing*—sharing information between the police, construction and scrap metal recycling industries helps to uncover crime trends and patterns that can assist in the efficient deployment of policing and security resources. Information sharing can be facilitated through a centralised and anonymous reporting point, such as a website like ScrapTheftAlert.com or telephone hotlines (Boba & Santos 2008; Bush 2009).
- *Standardised transaction recording*—the introduction of standardised practices, which require scrap metal recycling companies to record all transactions, can make it easier to track down stolen goods and offenders. For example, the US Senate considered introducing the Copper Theft Prevention Act in 2008. The proposed legislation required, at a minimum, that states introduce more stringent regulations around the scrap metal industry. Specifically, dealers would be required to keep comprehensive data on sellers, such as their name, address and driver's license number, as well as details of where they obtained the copper from (Kooi 2010). Although the Copper Theft Prevention Act was never passed into law, it may provide some direction for Australian policymakers.
- *Efficient management of metal supplies*—minimising the time between delivery to the construction site and installation reduces opportunities for theft. Deliveries should be scheduled so that there are never large amounts of valuable materials, like copper, on-site (Boba & Santos 2008).

- *Concealment of metal supplies*—simply hiding metal supplies from casual view or, in the case of copper, painting it a different colour so that it is not readily recognisable can reduce the extent of theft (Jones 2008).
- *Property markers and crime prevention signage*—property marking makes it more difficult for thieves to offload stolen goods and advertising the property marking technology on the perimeter of the construction site may also act as a deterrent for potential thieves.

## References

All URLs correct at May 2011

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