



JDiBrief – Crime

Metal theft: SUMMARY (1 of 5)

Author: Aiden Sidebottom, UCL Jill Dando Institute

Metal theft is common and costly. It refers to incidents in which items are stolen for the value of their constituent metals. Such items vary enormously, from air conditioning units being stolen for their copper tubing to the theft of catalytic converters for their palladium, radium and aluminium. The absence of a specific metal theft crime category limits the confidence we can place in estimates on the extent of the problem. Nonetheless, regional, national and international figures suggest large increases in the volume of metal theft over the past decade, largely attributed to steep increases in the price of many metals.

Metal theft is a clear illustration of how societal changes can generate opportunities for crime: increased (global) demand for metals and associated price increases tilt a traditionally undesirable crime target to desirable. It is important to consider that the same may also apply to other commodities that are not traditionally stolen, but which are susceptible to price increases.



PLACE: The widespread use of metals means that opportunities for metal theft are vast. Theft tends to concentrate at places where opportunities are plentiful and where guardianship is low, so reducing the risk of an offender being detected. Common locations include railway lines, churches and construction sites. Research in the US suggests that levels of metal theft are higher in cities that have a greater rate of scrap metal outlets.

OFFENDER: Metal thieves can be thought of as occupying two groups. The first are those that steal metal-bearing items. These include opportunists who exploit easily removable items to make a profit, as well more organized groups equipped to steal metal on a grander scale and with a working knowledge of the scrap metal industry. The second group concerns those that trade in stolen metals. These individuals might be complicit in the crime or purchase metals unknowingly. ‘Insiders’ who are working in or are familiar with industries where metals are common can populate either group.

TARGET: Metal theft takes many forms, reflecting the numerous applications for which metals are used. Common targets include beer kegs, manhole covers, catalytic converters, air conditioning units, copper wiring and cabling, lead from roofs and bronze plaques and statues. Most have experienced rapid price surges in recent years.



IMPLEMENTING RESPONSES: Despite a flurry of activity designed to reduce metal theft, robust evaluations of implemented measures are rare. Evidence to inform the selection of suitable strategies is therefore lacking. Measures that have been put in place tend to concentrate on increasing the difficulty in stealing metals and increasing the risks associated with disposing of them. This is against a backdrop of repeated calls to alter outdated UK legislation in ways that thwart the illegal trade in metals.