



# JDiBrief – Crime

## Metal theft: CRIME OVERVIEW (2 of 5)

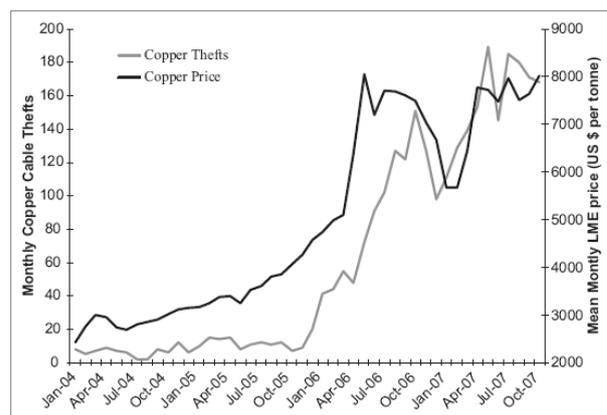
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**DEFINITION:** Metal theft refers to the illegal removal of items for their constituent metals. It can take numerous forms, from the theft of copper railway cabling to the theft of lead from church roofs. Unlike other items targeted in thefts, stolen metals have little inherent value to the metal thief; profit is only generated upon sale. For this reason, it is assumed that many items are stolen with the intention of being sold to scrap metal merchants.

Research on metal theft is limited, particularly reliable evaluations of efforts to reduce metal theft (or specific types of metal theft). This absence is partly explained by the difficulty in accessing metal theft data from police recorded crime statistics. In England and Wales there is no metal theft offence category; the theft of metal-bearing items can therefore be recorded under several crime categories (typically 'theft other'); making the extraction of relevant data difficult. What's more, disentangling metal thefts from other crime types can be tricky. Simply put, metal theft refers to incidents where the guiding motivation for theft relates to the material from which an item is made, not its form or function. So, for example, a (metal) bicycle stolen for transportation purposes does not count as metal theft going by this definition.

**TRENDS:** Metal theft is one of the fastest growing crime types internationally. This is noteworthy because most industrialised countries have witnessed general reductions in acquisitive crime over the last decade. Precise estimates on the extent of metal theft nationally are difficult to obtain because of the absence of a designated metal theft crime category. The British Home Office estimate that there were around 100,000 police recorded metal thefts in 2010/11. According to British Transport Police recorded crime data, the levels of copper cable theft have increased rapidly from 2005/06 to 2010/11.

**CAUSAL FACTORS:** Significant increases in the price of many metals - mainly attributed to a global supply-demand imbalance - are recognised as the main contributor to the surge in metal thefts. This is supported by research analysing the relationship between copper price and copper cable theft from the British Railway Network (see Figure 1 and the resources page for the paper by Sidebottom and colleagues which this is taken from). Together with the wide availability of metals, it is argued that price increases have generated greater opportunities for offenders to sell stolen metals at financially rewarding prices at a low risk of detection.



**Figure 1** - Monthly copper cable thefts and copper price. Reproduced with kind permission from SAGE.

**HARMS:** The harms associated with metal theft are considerable, both to national infrastructure (i.e. thefts from telecom and utility companies) and national heritage (i.e. thefts from and damage to historic buildings). In 2010/11 the theft of railway cabling is estimated to have caused disruption to over 35,000 rail services and £16 million in replacement costs. Just a few metres of severed railway cable can generate massive disruption to the railway network. The cutting of power lines or utility cables also carries significant risks of injuries and deaths to the metal thieves.