



JDiBrief – Crime

Metal theft: ANALYSIS (3 of 5)

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Research and analysis of metal theft has found the following general trends:

PLACE: Metals are ever-present in contemporary society, meaning that opportunities for metal theft are widespread. Places that appear particularly vulnerable to metal theft are railway networks, abandoned housing and churches and graveyards. These concentration patterns are attributed to a lack of guardianship at such locations.

Research in the U.S. shows that metal theft tends to be higher in cities with a greater number of scrap metal yards per 100,000 residents. Given the finding that offenders often prefer stealing items that they can sell quickly and easily, it is plausible that an easily accessible, specialised market for metals might act as an incentive to steal.

OFFENDER: Metal thieves can be organised into two broad groups: those that steal metal-bearing items (thieves) and those involved in the trade in stolen metals (scrap metal buyers). The former is comprised of three types of offender:

- The opportunist. These offenders may not purposefully seek out metals to steal but will exploit easy opportunities where adequate guardianship is lacking.
- Organised groups. These offenders tend to steal large quantities of metals and have good knowledge of the scrap metal industry.
- Drug addicts. It is commonly stated that drug addicts steal metals to feed their habit. These offenders likely steal small amounts of metal that can easily be sold for profit.

Scrap metal buyers play a key role in the metal theft problem. They are responsible for converting stolen metals into cash (or in some cases drugs), thus providing a financially rewarding incentive to steal. Scrap metal buyers may be intermediate fences or scrap metal merchants. What's more, they may purchase stolen metals knowingly or unknowingly. Finally, 'insiders' familiar with or working in metal-rich industries might populate either offender group, through stealing metals themselves or colluding with other offenders on the location of - or means to steal - metals.

TARGET: Metal theft can take many forms. Common targets include beer kegs, manhole covers, catalytic converters, air conditioning units, copper wiring and cabling, lead from roofs and bronze plaques and statues. Variation in the types of metal theft in an area might reflect variations in the number of opportunities available for different metals and/or the ease with which they can be stolen, as well broader fluctuations in the price of different metals.

Active metals – such as 'live' power cabling – tend to generate greater damage than the theft of inactive metals – such as copper piping from abandoned homes. A common difficulty experienced by police forces and the scrap metal industry is distinguishing legitimate from stolen metals. Many metals bear little, if any, unique features to determine their source and/or owner.

