



JDiBrief – Crime

Metal theft: IMPLEMENTING RESPONSES (4 of 5)

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The recent surge in metal thefts has prompted the implementation of several prevention schemes. In the UK this has been alongside repeated calls for changes to relevant legislation, particularly updating the Scrap Metal Dealers Act 1964 to help thwart metal thieves and increase the transparency of the scrap metal industry. Presently, reliable evidence on the effectiveness of preventive measures is limited. Robust evaluations to complement anecdotal reports are required. An important requirement of any evaluation of metal theft prevention activities is to demonstrate that any changes in the levels of theft cannot be explained by simple changes in the price of metals.

Efforts to reduce metal theft have tended to focus on two areas: 1) making it harder to steal metals and 2) making it riskier or less rewarding to sell stolen metals. These are expanded on below:

1. Across several crime types, evidence demonstrates that increasing the effort required to steal an item can lead to reductions in the levels of theft. Various target hardening schemes have therefore been implemented to reduce the ease with which metals can be stolen. These include the implementation of security measures, such as the chaining of manhole covers or the caging of air conditioning units. It can also refer to changes in practice to remove available targets, such as not leaving copper piping at building sites or copper cabling alongside railway lines. In addition, measures have been put in place to increase the security at places where metals are commonly found. Removing gaps in perimeter fences near railway lines and controlling access to utility companies or construction sites are common examples.
2. **Property marking:** Many groups affected by metal theft now use invisible forensic technology to tag their metals. The rationale is that ‘tagged’ metals will be easier to identify as stolen – overcoming the target anonymity problem – and therefore increasing the risks associated with disposing of stolen metals. It can also be used as an intelligence gathering tool to track where stolen metals tend to be sold. Anecdotal accounts report some success following the implementation of such schemes. However, success is dependent on incentivising scrap metal buyers to routinely test whether metals are ‘tagged’ and to refuse purchasing those that are.

Disrupting the market: Selling stolen metals for profit is recognised as the primary motivation of metal thieves. Scrap metal yards and pawn shops provide a specialised ready market. It follows that intervening in such markets in ways that impede the sale of stolen metals while having little effect on the trade of legitimate metals should lead to reductions in the problem. A common disruption technique has been to encourage scrap metal merchants to request that all their customers provide personal details (such as a photographic ID) when selling metals. Initial evidence from a police operation in the North East of England – Operation Tornado – indicates that this strategy is effective in reducing the levels of metal theft in the targeted areas. Success however is dependent on identifying the scrap metal buyers in the area and forging effective relationships to ensure high levels of participation in and adherence to such a scheme.

