



Copper Theft from Air Conditioners: What's the Risk?

RISK ALERT

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What's the Risk? A sharp increase in the theft of copper components from air conditioners has created challenges for property owners and the general public. With the market value of copper increasing as much as 400% since 2000, copper has become more attractive to thieves looking for an easy source of cash. Unscrupulous salvage yards readily accept copper, often paying up to 90% of market price. While the copper components may bring only a few hundred dollars at a salvage yard, repair or replacement of the damaged air conditioning units may cost tens of thousands of dollars or more. Repairs to damaged roofs, walls, fences, and security systems can also run to tens of thousands of dollars, and the costs of interrupted and lost business can be even higher.

Why Are Air Conditioners Targeted? Air conditioners are targeted by thieves because they are:

- Full of copper components (tubing, condenser coils, etc.) that may be worth a few hundred dollars
- Easy to dismantle. The components are easy to remove and carry away.
- Often located behind fences or landscaping, or on roofs, where thieves can work without being seen.
- Rarely protected by standard security measures such as alarms and protective covers.

Secure Your Air Conditioners. Consider security when choosing the location for an outdoor unit. While it may be more attractive to install the unit behind a building, a front-yard location may be more effective in deterring thieves. Some units must be installed on roofs, of course, and these should be protected as well. Locate outdoor units as close to the building as possible, in order to minimize the length of copper pipe between the building and the unit. Install outdoor units on concrete pads; attach them to the pads with heavy-duty anchors, and cover them with locked, attached, heavy-duty metal cages. Choose cast iron, expanded metal mesh, or other very heavy-duty materials that cannot be easily cut with standard tools. Some reports indicate that spray painting copper piping is effective in deterring theft, as salvage yards will not accept copper if it has been painted.

Secure Your Property. Conduct a security risk assessment to identify vulnerable areas where trespassers might gain access. Your insurer's loss

control professional, or a security consultant, can assist you with this assessment, as well as with strengthening overall security. Allow only authorized personnel on site. Do not assume that all service people and vehicles are legitimate. Copper thieves have sometimes disguised themselves as service technicians in order to gain access to air conditioning units. Invest in a video surveillance system, with cameras trained on the air conditioning units, driveway and parking areas, and other vulnerable areas.

Keep Thieves Out. Choose the strongest fences and hardware that you can afford. Trespassers can easily break through low-quality fences, gates, locks, and chains. Determined thieves will not hesitate to drive through a fence. Prevent access to roofs and upper floors; remove ladders from the property. Trim branches to prevent criminals from climbing to balconies or roof. Remove exterior fixed ladders, stairs, and other means of access. (Do not remove fire escapes.) Store ladders inside locked buildings.

Install Alarms. Invest in an alarm system linked to the police or a central monitoring service. A growing number of property owners are installing alarms that set off very loud horns or sirens if any part of the AC unit is disturbed. Other AC alarms will sound when they detect a drop in the pressure of the fluid refrigerant or a disturbance to the power supply.

Use Security Lighting. Provide lighting around all buildings, especially around entrances, exterior walls, and walkways. Focus lights on air conditioning units. Connect the lighting to motion detectors. In addition to frightening away trespassers, the sudden glare from a normally-dark area can alert neighbors, police, and security staff that something is amiss.

Team with Police, Fire, and Neighbors. Ask police to patrol the property and to let you know of any irregularities. Inform police immediately if you see suspicious people or vehicles, evidence of trespassing or theft, or other criminal activity. Get to know your neighbors; ask them to alert police if they see suspicious activities, vehicles, or people.

For more detailed information on this topic, request Sequoia Risk Management Guide SRMG-017, Understanding and Preventing Theft of Copper from Air Conditioners.