



Copper Theft: Challenges for Apartment Managers

RISK ALERT

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Augusta, Georgia — Thieves stole about \$17,800 worth of copper piping and air-conditioning units from an apartment complex. Water released from the damaged plumbing flooded the lower level of one building with two inches of water, causing \$40,000 in damage.

Charlotte, North Carolina — An early-morning explosion and fire at a multi-unit apartment building was caused by a gas leak that started when someone tried to steal copper pipes and wires, fire investigators said. The thief had inadvertently punctured a gas line, causing gas to leak spread. Since electricity was on in the occupied building, any switch might have sparked the blast. Two units were destroyed by the fire.

Niagara, New York — Police arrested three people who were caught outside an apartment building with several duffel bags full of copper piping. The suspects caused extensive damage when they ripped out the plumbing.

Why Do Thieves Target Copper?

With the market value of copper increasing more than 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. It is easy for thieves to convert copper to cash.

While batches of stolen copper piping, wire, or other components may bring only a few hundred dollars at a salvage yard, repair or replacement of damaged roofs, walls, fences, and security systems can run to tens of thousands of dollars, and the costs of interrupted and lost business can be even higher.

Thieves look for copper in many forms and places:

- New wiring, piping, and other components awaiting installation, stored at construction sites.
- Wiring (even high-voltage wiring), piping, and electrical components in unused or vacant buildings or those under construction; electrical facilities; streetlamps; traffic signals, etc.
- Gutters, downspouts, lightning conductors, and other roof components.
- Copper coils and piping in air conditioners.
- Outdoor sculptures or architectural components.

Secure Your Property

Conduct a security risk assessment to identify vulnerable areas where trespassers might gain access. 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 portable ladders in 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. Connect the lighting to motion detectors. In addition to frightening away trespassers, the sudden glare 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 protecting property against copper theft, request Sequoia Risk Management Guide SRMG-018, *Understanding and Preventing Copper Theft*.