Preventing Copper Thefts

If someone were to say the words “theft at religious organization,” you might think of a stolen purse, collection, or audio-visual equipment. What you probably wouldn’t imagine is a group of thieves coming to the property at night, cutting away the air conditioning units and hauling them off.

However, an increasing number of both ground- and roof-mounted heating and air conditioning (HVAC) units have been stolen or destroyed at religious organizations across the country for the copper components they contain. Worldwide demand for copper has brought its price to an all-time high. One result has been that copper theft crimes are on the rise across the nation.

Consider the following examples:

- Thieves destroyed nine air conditioning units at a religious organization in the south to obtain their copper. The system had just been installed six months earlier at a cost of $100,000.
- At a religious organization in the west, seven rooftop air conditioning units were targeted by copper thieves. The damage was more than $47,000.
- Thieves stole copper gutters and downspouts, coping and wall caps from a religious organization in the south. The value of the loss exceeded $40,000.

In addition to heating and air conditioning units, other items being targeted by thieves include copper wiring, copper gutters, copper pipe, and other electrical appliances and products containing copper.

Copper Thefts in General

- Copper is 100 percent recyclable, and recyclers pay, on average, 90 percent of the new copper price for scrap copper. Thus, it is an attractive target for thieves.
- Copper theft is a crime of opportunity. This implies the following:
    - Access is quite easy – in most cases, a vehicle can be driven to the site of the theft.
    - The item of interest is not well protected; for example, no alarms, cameras or barriers.
    - The perpetrators can operate in an area without being observed.
    - The potential for detection is limited; for example, no guards or patrols.
    - The target area is remote or not well traveled; that is, the site or building is unoccupied for periods of time or is off the main path.
    - The target is considered to be easy.
- Copper theft requires a limited number of tools.
- Copper thieves do not have to be highly trained technicians.

Common Fact Pattern

- Religious organizations of all sizes are being targeted by copper thieves.
- Religious organizations in all communities, rural and urban, are being victimized. Many thefts have occurred in what police would describe as low crime areas.
- The thieves often target large HVAC units because of the large amount of copper, but small units are usually easier targets. It takes less than five minutes for a thief to steal $20 worth of copper from a small AC unit.
- While ground-mounted HVAC units are the most common target, roof-mounted units have also been stolen.
- HVAC units have been the primary target in 80% of religious organization copper thefts, but any copper product is vulnerable.
- Most thefts of copper components occur at night.
- Thieves will return to the same target, which they call a “target of opportunity,” time and again.

Preventing Copper Theft

To protect against copper thefts at your religious organization, consider taking the following steps:

- Develop a security plan for your religious organization, which identifies your vulnerabilities. Ask your local law enforcement professionals to assist you with this process.
- Deny access to your religious organization’s property during off times of the day by adding fences and gates. Post appropriate “No Trespassing” signs on your religious organization’s property. Ask your local law enforcement to assist in enforcing the law on private property.
- Add security lighting to areas where thieves and other criminals may hide.
- Deny access to your roof-mounted HVAC units by removing fixed ladders (do not remove fire escapes) and other step-ups including tree branches that may assist thieves. Portable ladders should be kept inside a locked building.
- Consider the use of steel cages to enclose your AC units. The heavier the gauge of steel the longer it will take to cut. For example, 10–12-gauge steel can take one to two hours to cut. Do not use standard chain link fencing as it can be cut quickly.
- Develop a “House of Worship Watch” program, and work with your neighbors to assist in keeping an eye on your property.



Example: This photograph illustrates AC units located at the back of the building creating an easy target for theft.



Example: This photograph illustrates AC units protected by a steel cage and security lighting.

- Use security cameras, as they are a valuable tool for protecting your property. But make note that for them to be fully effective, they must be properly protected, installed, and monitored.
- Use alarms that are mounted to your HVAC units. If the unit is tampered with, including cutting of refrigerant and power lines, an alarm will sound. This security measure may be a valuable tool in protecting the units, particularly if your building is currently protected by a security alarm. Contact your local security company or HVAC contractor for details.

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