

Scrap Theft Bulletin

Provided by the Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries

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Pay Now or Pay Later? You Decide

By Rick Arrington

What is the deductible for theft in your homeowner's policy? That is the minimum cost when an air conditioning or heat pump unit is stolen for the cost of the metal after it is scrapped. In addition to the insurance deductible costs, damages caused by the thief may also mount, not to mention the emotional toil on the homeowner who feels violated and no longer safe.

Today, heating ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) units continue to be targeted by thieves for metal content. Targets go beyond the foreclosed home and include businesses and faith-based organizations. Lost income due to being closed for repairs can be a costly proposition for the business owner and churches often don't discover the missing units until pipes have frozen or the building is too hot or cold for a gathering.

Estimates for replacement of a single condensing unit are upwards of \$3,500, and one must consider the cost beyond replacement or repair as well and determine how much one is willing to invest up front versus in the end. There is, however, good news for prevention-minded owners who recognize that a little investment will save a lot of loss.

Prevention techniques and tools are established to make it more difficult and time consuming for a thief to accomplish their goal. The longer a thief must labor, the more likely they will be detected or captured, thus often moving them to another target. Providing barriers to prevent them from selling the stolen items with ease, is also a deterrent.

We begin to address prevention in the context of HVAC units by considering what we can do to increase the perception by the criminal that they may be seen or identified. The techniques range from the simplest of things such as removing fencing, shrubbery, or other visual obstructions to the unit. If a neighbor or passer on the street can see the unit, the perception by the thief is that they can be seen. Enhance the perception at night by adding lighting, from a simple lighting unit to even more effective motion sensor lighting, or lighting with a motion-activated camera. While this is not always practical for the homeowner, there are certain preventative enhancements can be made. Portable cameras have been a great tool for the law enforcement to use in targeted HVAC theft areas. The law enforcement agency should reinforce this deterrent by openly publicizing the use of the concealed portable cameras to address these

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crimes. If vacant homes are a target, local realtor groups should even consider the purchase the cameras for law enforcement to use and monitor.

The most inexpensive theft prevention tool is a discus padlock. It looks just as one might imagine from the name, like a disc, and some prevention practitioners affectionately refer to it as a “hockey puck.” This tool prevents the thief from safely removing the unit without disconnecting electricity to the unit and most homes and churches have the power shut off in close proximity to the unit. The electric box has a slot for a padlock or seal to be installed but it is often not added. If the fire code in the locality allows for the addition, simply add the discus padlock to prevent the unauthorized disconnection of electricity to the unit. Use the best discus lock you can afford; high security discus locks average between \$25 and \$50. It recommended over the hanging padlock because it makes it very difficult to use bolt cutters to destroy the lock. While cutting instruments may be used, in most cases the metal thief will not spend the time for risk of being detected. If the thief is unable to quickly break the lock, shut off the power, and lift the unit onto truck quickly, they will likely move on to another target.

Another popular, yet somewhat more expensive theft prevention tools are cages that enclose the HVAC unit and are affixed to the pad. These range from a simple steel bar construction to some more elaborate and companies selling these products emphasize their “deterrent” impact. The deterrent is again based upon the effort required to achieve the reward.

One reason that HVAC at churches and businesses have been targeted is the ease of knowing when they are likely to be vacant. If no one is there to see a suspicious vehicle behind the structure or hear the loading of the unit, the probable observation and detection make the site an ideal target. Enter the use of an alarm. Currently there are commercial alarms made specifically for monitoring HVAC systems. One website states that their product monitors up to four condensing units and can activate an audible siren, a phone dialer, or other security device. This system basically alarms when the unit is tampered with as indicated by voltage interruption (power loss) or refrigerant loss (cut lines) and costs an estimated \$500 per unit. Another similar product uses the existing security system to set off an alarm when the HVAC is tampered with. Even traditional alarm companies are offering alarms for the HVAC as part of their systems and most monitor any change to the standard programming for voltage, refrigeration pressure, or other known entities; once a change outside the set parameter is detected, the system alarms. Obviously, the use of any alarm system for an HVAC system should have a battery back-up in case the power supply is cut.

Finally, it is important to mention the value of identifying stolen property and the deterrent impact of making it known. Technology provides great tools for this purpose. For example,

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there are micro identification identifiers available commercially that can easily be applied and tracked in the event of a theft. This product offers unique identifiers to the individual by way of tiny practically undetectable brushed or sprayed on applications and they can be read by law enforcement and scrap recyclers to recover stolen products. The deterrent impact may be enhanced by use of signage announcing the use of the product, publication of law enforcement using the system to recover stolen items through media reports, and publicized prosecution, when cases are made by use of the product or similar methods. Similar methods are owner-applied numbers via engravers, or other non-visible marking technologies.

HVAC theft will continue to be a concern of all of the legitimate scrap recycler industry, law enforcement, and victims. We must recognize that none of the three can defeat this crime alone. The potential victim also needs to be informed by local law enforcement, specifically crime prevention practitioners, of steps they can take to be less attractive targets. Law enforcement in partnership with recyclers will continue to address the problem through investigations, arrests, laws, and prosecution.

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ScrapTheftAlert.com Success Story

On March 23, 2018, the Pike County (MO) Sheriff's Office broadcast an alert for the theft of approximately 1,800 pounds of copper wire valued at \$5,100. From the photo of the stolen material included in the alert, an area police department contacted the sheriff's office advising the arrest of a suspect, on charges unrelated to the copper theft, who had the wire in his possession. Not until the alert was broadcast did the police department learn of the theft of the copper wire.

Law Enforcement Outreach

ISRI will be exhibiting at the National Sheriffs Association Conference at the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center in New Orleans, June 17-19. Stop by booth #847 for details on ScrapTheftAlert.com and additional information on fighting metals theft.