



Copper theft a rapidly growing crime

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Phone outages, power outages, rising construction costs... it's not the cost of growth, but the cost of crime that's increasingly behind those things. In a hidden camera investigation, *News 3 Investigators* expose what thieves are stealing and how far they'll go to get the precious metal.

Most people think pennies are worthless. But their copper content is worth between \$3 and \$4 a pound. That's enough to entice thieves to steal it in every form, costing hundreds of thousands of dollars in theft, damage and threats to your safety.



The name, Copper Creek Estates, couldn't be more appropriate. The crime couldn't be more brazen. 2,000 feet, that's 14,000 pounds, of phone cable, cut down for the copper. "Luckily, not snapping any of the poles that it was attached to. They then took about 1,100 feet of that cable and put over 2,000 people out of service," explains Embarq's Scott Mitchell.



Clarence Terrell

Embarq has had 15 thefts in just the last three months. Last week at the Cherry Lane II construction site, thieves stole a water truck, hooked a chain to it, and pulled down 1,000 more feet of cable.

Why do the thieves go to the trouble and do something so potentially dangerous?

"There's a big nexus between methamphetamine and the people that steal the wire," says Metro's Captain Randy Montandon.

Drug users putting public safety at risk to feed their habit. Captain Montandon oversees the construction theft detail in Metro's Property Crimes Unit.

"The bottom line is, it's dollars and cents. Copper wire has gone through the roof, well, copper by the pound has gone through the roof," says Captain Montandon, "over \$3 a pound in some locations, so a lot of people are seeing it as an easy way to make fast money."

Since April 2005, the price of copper pipe and tubing has risen nearly 71 percent. Thieves steal it and re-sell it. "The salvage yards have gone from 60 visitors a day to over 250 visitors a day with salvage wire," says Montandon.

Recycling plants take it in virtually every form. But Metro says they're not part of the problem. "They're absolutely part of the solution, and as a matter of fact, they're under specific licensing as to how they can receive this material. So, they require photo identification," says Montandon.

Sounds good in theory, but would it hold true in practice?

We went shopping with our hidden camera, buying nearly \$200 worth of copper pipe at a local home improvement store. Then, we took our brand new copper to sell for salvage. To see if we'd be asked for identification, we randomly picked three recycling businesses out of the phone book.

Our first stop was the Silver Dollar. "I know our facility. It is not a problem, because we are picky in what we take," said the Silver Dollar's Brandon Smith.

Darcy: "So if I walk into your yard with 10 lengths of brand spankin' new copper pipes, like a \$190 retail pipes, what should happen?"

Brandon: "I would just send you away. I don't buy it."

But the Silver Dollar yard on Lossee did. We had the same experience at Nevada Recycling, where we signed our receipt *Zippy McGee* with no identification, and at Lakewood as well.

One of the biggest criminals is 40-year-old Clarence Terrell. Terrell has cost Nevada taxpayers about \$250,000. Every time he's been arrested, he was released pending trial and would go back to work stealing copper wire from streetlights. After his third arrest, a judge decided to keep Terrell behind bars. He plead guilty and is now serving prison time.

In the last three months, Metro has arrested about 14 people for stealing copper. Embarq is also working with the FBI to explore federal charges of destruction of telecommunications as a possible homeland security issue.



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