

With the Price Of Copper Up, The Plumbing Can Go Missing

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When Mike Roscoe first saw water running along the gangway between his two row houses, he thought he was dealing with a leaking pipe, not the impact of global economic forces.

After all, why would thieves -- midnight plumbers as the police call them -- tear out the floorboards, toilets, even the walls of the homes, all in search of copper tubing?

"To go through this effort? I don't get it," said Mr. Roscoe, 39, a truck driver and fledgling landlord who discovered the damage Monday when he arrived to do some work to help get his two attached, red-brick houses in the Allentown neighborhood ready to rent. "You could make more money getting a job at minimum wage."

Not necessarily. In the last year, a worldwide surge in demand for copper, largely from construction booms in China and India, has pushed up its value. Though the market price has slipped, it is still more than double what it was just over a year ago.

Scrap metal dealers in Pittsburgh said they were paying about \$2 a pound for No. 2 copper, which by definition has been bent or soldered, more than triple the 65 cents they paid a year ago. That kind of payout makes a copper haul like the approximately 20 pounds taken out of Mr. Roscoe's row houses worth about eight hours of work at minimum wage (\$5.15 an hour).

Though the news media has reported thefts of copper wire from streetlights, electrical substations and cellphone towers across the country, most of it is taken from abandoned homes or homes under construction, usually by drug addicts looking for quick cash. The theft from Mr. Roscoe's houses was among eight similar thefts in

Pittsburgh over a few days this month. About 250 such thefts have been reported in the last year, compared with perhaps a dozen last year, the police said.

"It's a problem, a big one," said Sgt. Kevin Gasiorowski, who supervises the city's burglary squad. "It's not going to go away till the price goes down."

The surge in thefts has sent scrap metal dealers scrambling to proclaim that they are doing everything they can to catch people trying to sell them stolen copper.

"The industry takes this very seriously," said Bryan McGannon, a spokesman for the Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries, an association in Washington of more than 1,400 dealers who own more than 3,000 scrap yards. "But scrap dealers have a difficult situation on their hands: legitimate scrap material and stolen material looks identical."

The institute has joined with the National Crime Prevention Council to spread information about specific thefts in a campaign that will use the famous McGruff the Crime Dog logo.

The institute also put out a list of what it calls recommended practices for scrap dealers in an effort to thwart thieves and help the police. The suggestions include videotaping all transactions and requiring identification from people selling scrap metal. Though Pittsburgh has had an ordinance on its books for decades requiring scrap dealers to get copies of identification of everyone they buy from and forward them to the police after each transaction, enforcement did not start until this year.

"I don't know if it's stopped them, but I have a lot fewer customers off the street now," said John Sambol, manager of Northside Scrap Metals.

The exchange of information has led to several arrests, the police say, but most scrap recyclers outside the city do not have the same requirements. Sergeant Gasiorowski said that although scrap dealers say they do not buy suspicious copper, "the stuff is going somewhere."