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## Thieves Get Rich in Scrap Metal Boom

By PETER APPLEBOME, SPECIAL TO THE NEW YORK TIMES

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That theft has since stopped, but the city has a new problem. Thieves are making off with the aluminum benches from bus shelters.

Both cases are examples of a vexing problem increasingly facing communities around the country. Along with a boom in recycling and the scrap metal industry has come a wave of vandalism by people scavenging public property for anything from copper wiring to aluminum highway guardrails for sale as scrap.

Officials say the problem is not new, but rising urban poverty and, particularly, crack addiction have made it a persistent problem even as prices for some materials have fallen. 'Beyond What You Can Imagine'

"The problem goes far beyond what you can imagine," said Merle Abbott, whose company, American Lighting and Signalization, does much of the lighting maintenance for the Florida state highway system. "Nobody seems to know it, but we have a national problem we can't control."

Scrap metal industry officials say they are aware of the problem and are doing their best to control it by being on the alert for stolen materials. But that is not an easy task since much of the material sold as scrap is impossible to identify. They say also that some stolen material is sold directly to contractors rather than for scrap.

But some public works officials say that many scrap dealers accept material with no concern for whether it appears to be stolen. The United States now recycles 90 million tons of materials each year.

Copper and aluminum are the main materials stolen, but almost anything that can be recycled or sold as scrap is attractive. Last year 300 fire hydrants were out of commission in Houston solely because thieves were making off with a brass nut-and-valve mechanism inside the hydrant.

The material usually does not net much. A pound of aluminum now brings only about 40 cents, down from about 80 cents a year ago. But some officials say the nation's drug problems are perpetuating the problem even as prices remain depressed.

"I think the rise in crack cocaine had really increased the amount of petty thefts, where someone might destroy \$100 worth of product for something that sells for \$5," said Steve Levetan, legislative affairs director for the Southeastern chapter of the Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries, representing 1,850 companies. "That \$5 used to be meaningless. Now it's a hit of crack." Petty Thieves and Big Operators

The problem varies from city to city and from minor irritant to major concern. It apparently includes petty theft and more professional operations that move in search of new markets, public works officials say.

After the wave of copper wire theft ended here more than a year ago, the same problem surfaced in Richmond, and officials here say the thieves probably moved from here to there.

Sometimes the thefts are substantial. Earlier this year, thieves took 7,000 feet of aluminum chain-link fence and poles from the Youngmann Expressway north of Buffalo. Two years ago, they took half a mile of it from the Bronx River Parkway in New York City. A police officer in Jacksonville, Fla., last year stopped a driver and found sawed-off light standards in six-foot lengths stacked in the back of his truck like wood.

Such incidents, along with major thefts from highway supply yards around the country, indicate that the problem goes beyond scavenging by addicts and the homeless.

"When anyone takes a half mile of chain-link fence, it's not a petty theft," said Lucius Riccio, Deputy Transportation Commissioner for highway operations for New York City.

Kenneth L. Barnes, traffic service supervisor for the North Carolina Department of Transportation, said the copper wire theft began here almost two years ago. At its peak, all but 200 of some 800 highway lights on a seven-mile stretch of road had been knocked out. About 200 are still out.

Mr. Barnes said thieves had gone to the base of the lights and ripped out about 22 miles of copper wiring from the interstate highway system circling the city. Much of the theft was apparently done in daylight because passing motorists reported seeing the thieves at work. After stripping off the insulation, the thieves then sold it at local scrap yards.

Officials say such thefts create safety problems for drivers, but Charlotte officials say figures are not available on whether there was an increase in accidents in the areas affected.

Copper was not the only problem. Thieves in Charlotte stole downed 50-foot light poles, stockpiled highway signs and much else. Other areas report similar problems. James A. Shay, state maintenance engineer for the Illinois Department of Transportation, said thieves had routinely sawed off the aluminum bridge railings on the Mississippi River bridge connecting East St. Louis, Ill., with St. Louis.

"Because of this kind of theft, we've redesigned all of our bridges so that they have 100 percent concrete parapets," he said. 'Quickly Convert Into Money'

Robert McMahon, chief investigator for the New Jersey Department of Transportation, said the state had a particular problem with thefts of aluminum screening across highway overpasses, used to protect the roadway below, and with thefts of fencing, used to keep deer off roadways.

"The big thing about this is it's not organized by anybody," he said. "It's little people that are doing it. They just see a material that they can quickly convert into money."

Mr. Levetan, of the scrap industry trade group, said the industry had tried to become more vigilant in recent years. He said several states had adopted laws requiring identification of people who sell to scrap yards or to recyclers. In problem areas, industry groups are encouraged to work with the police to be on the alert for stolen materials.

"Where we have that kind of rapport we're able to make cases," he said. "Very often we have a situation where the police historically have not talked with us, and we haven't talked with them. I think that's changing."

He added that the industry is also a prime target for the same thieves who sell to it.

But most states do not have laws requiring identification, and the cooperation Mr. Levetan talks about still seems to be the exception rather than the rule.

"If the people running the scrap yards can do a deal and get a good price, they'll do it," said Mr. Barnes of the North Carolina Transportation Department. "Our name's on the signs, but it doesn't do any good."