

Metal theft is big business and municipalities are often helpless in the face of determined thieves. LUKE REID spent a morning with the City of Cape Town's specialised metal theft unit, the Copperheads, to see how teamwork and persistence makes a difference.



Photos: Rens Bindeman, Pieter Hendricks and Luke Reid

Under the 2008 Second Hand Goods Bill the possession of burnt cable is a criminal offence, which will make the fight against metal theft much less frustrating.

On the streets with the Copperheads

The rundown old Toyota Corolla is exactly where it should be: in the driveway of the neat suburban house at the address it is registered for. Things are going well. We set off early this morning after receiving an e-mail tip-off from someone who had seen people with the car tampering with traffic light boxes next to Rondebosch Common. Although it seems a flimsy lead, the 'Copperheads' are following it with relentless confidence. The day began at the local licensing office where, as part of the system, there is a dedicated staff member on hand to liaise with the Copperheads. We were given the vehicle's registration details and a picture of the traffic light batteries that the occupants might have been trying to steal.

The traffic department staff member joined our party. Next stop was a nearby police station to pick up two South African Police Services members who, unlike the Copperhead's metro police members, have powers of search and seizure. Outside the house, 20 minutes later, I have serious doubts. It seems no one is at home and people on the street are staring at 14 uniformed men pacing around the tiny front yard of such an ordinary-looking house. Maybe it would be better to come back another day. Then things get moving. We contact the car owner on her cellphone, and a helpful neighbour brings a key to open the house, whereupon we find a young man asleep in a back room. He explains that he had lent his mother's car to a friend at the time that it was spotted. He agrees to co-operate.



Councillor Pieter van Dalen and Pieter Hendricks, Manager of Traffic Systems in Cape Town East recovered R72 000 worth of traffic light batteries.

Half an hour, and two more stops, later, we arrive at a small 'Battery Discount Cabin', just around the corner from the first house. Right there, stacked in front of the counter, is a large pile of traffic light batteries, easily identified by their size and markings. Looking around we see the batteries everywhere, many with their stickers stripped off. An extremely co-operative assistant keeps adding to the pile, and by the time we leave we have recovered 72 batteries, each worth R1 000, which we cart away in a hired truck. And we've made four arrests.

The last stop of the day is a police station near where the first batteries were stolen. The police are very helpful. We make our statements, hand over the stolen goods and send the suspects down to the cells.

For Councillor Pieter van Dalen, who heads the Copperheads, this is all in a day's work. More importantly, he insists that the police would never have got as far – no one has time to waste on a small-time crook stealing batteries. Except that with scrap metal, small crooks usually lead to bigger crooks.

The Copperheads are a powerful example of what can be achieved when a municipality takes responsibility for policing its own assets actively and effectively. Headed by the enterprising Councillor van Dalen, the unit is a hands-on response to the metal thieves and those who buy the scrap metal and create a market for it.

According to van Dalen, the unit has



Stealing copper is almost always an extremely destructive affair, involving damage far beyond the value of the relatively small amounts of the metal found inside most electrical installations.

cut the City of Cape Town's losses to metal thieves from R22 million a year to just R500 000 in 2007, this while thefts elsewhere in the country were escalating, with the average loss for the other big metros being almost R15 million, according to data from the Department of Provincial and Local Government.

The Copperheads were set up in collaboration with South African Revenue Protection Association

(SARPA) consultant Rens Bindeman, who had been working with the city in dealing with electricity theft. Bindeman says he saw the unit as a test case that would allow him to persuade other municipalities to take similar action. While the unit is now hailed as a success, setting it up was difficult.

'You have to be creative to tackle some of these problems, because the normal way doesn't work,' says van Dalen,

How the Second Hand Goods Bill will help

The Second Hand Goods Bill is currently waiting for a final decision about whether it should include second hand books before it is signed into law. When this happens, it will update the Second Hand Goods Act of 1955 that was drafted before the theft of copper or hi-tech electronic goods became important issues. The current law is ineffective at fighting these crimes, as it covers a limited range of goods, makes it easy for criminals to be released on technicalities, and provides for lenient sentences that are easily shrugged off given the value of the illegal activity.

The new law has been written in close collaboration with stakeholders, particularly Business Against Crime, and it is considered to be a very solid piece of legislation. Apart from the inclusion of electronic goods such as cellphones, the bill will introduce the following major changes:

- Second hand goods dealers (including scrap yards) will be required to join a self-policing association accredited by the SAPS, or else abide by much stricter rules. Commentators say this will take a

lot of the burden of regulation off police, and it will make things easier for legal dealers who will have to deal with less duplication of records.

- The possession of burnt cable will be a criminal offence. In the past many cases were thrown out of court even if thieves had been caught red-handed, because service providers could not send representatives to identify cable in court.
- The maximum sentence for dealing in stolen goods will be increased from one to 10 years.
- Registration of second hand goods dealers will be more difficult, because they have to be part of an association. They will also be much easier to close down, whereas before police could just seize goods.
- The law makes provision for the Minister of Safety and Security to extend policing power to other agencies, such as metro police, industry bodies or by-law enforcers.



Left: Tools recovered from cable thieves. Above: A 1.6km line dug up by thieves in Atlantis in the Western Cape.

adding that many municipalities privatise this kind of work. But using security companies can be counterproductive.

'I have found that it is not in the interest of the security companies to actually catch the criminals. It cost the city R200 million a year to employ security companies before, and it didn't help.'

The Copperheads were set up with the structure of a typical specialised police unit, and as such its members do all types of law enforcement work, although their speciality and focus is metal theft.

It has taken extensive training to build the unit into what it is. 'They came from everywhere,' explains van Dalen. 'From the dog-catching unit, the market-watch unit, the security guards at the building, the guys in the security camera division. And these people have blossomed.'

The specialisation is particularly important in dealing with the organised crime aspect of copper theft; van Dalen explains, 'our strategy was to first start catching the petty thief, finding out where he was selling the stuff, working our way up through the scrap yards. On July 13 2008 we hit SA Metals in a raid and we found a lot of stolen goods there. The National Prosecuting Authority is now prosecuting a representative of the company.'

A much bigger problem than you think

Replacing stolen or damaged cables costs South Africa R500 million a year, according to Engineering News. And with the thefts mostly hitting utilities, parastatals and municipalities, the estimated cost to the economy is nearly R5 billion a year.

Thefts on this scale – which may involve stealing up to 40km of Telkom lines in a single night – are carried out by large, highly organised criminal syndicates, according to Rens Bindeman of the South African Revenue Protection Association (SARPA).

'They are groups that focus on any crime. Copper theft is just one of the issues. In the Cape we found when the guys who were stealing perlemoen get knocked they start stealing copper. Same people. They've got training centres in Gauteng and they pay some of their guys salaries to steal copper.' He describes how police officers have sometimes been strip-searched for cellphones before they raid scrap-yards, so as to prevent tip-offs.

'Their intelligence is good, and they are very mobile. They only hit soft targets. The moment you make the target hard, they move to the next soft target. The challenge of small municipalities is to become a hard target. The mobility of the syndicates is the biggest problem. A normal thief will steal in one place, but these guys have lots of vehicles and they move around, or they drop people off in various towns in a region. We call it the "balloon effect" – you push on one side of the balloon, it bubbles out on the other side. As soon as a bigger municipality starts reacting to them, they move to a smaller municipality. But if the bigger one says, "we're free", they go back there again.'

Bindeman says that in many cases syndicates will recruit people inside municipalities or utilities to provide access, information, and even logistic support. 'That is why the smaller municipalities might not know about the thefts, because it is done by insiders. Telkom is reporting thefts in every town in South Africa. You go to the smallest little place, and you find problems.' He says that municipalities should be particularly wary of bulk thefts from stores, which may be very hard to detect, or prove. Although the price of copper has fallen, he predicts thefts will continue. 'We have found that with prices going down, in some areas the thefts increase because they need to steal more.'

Eight ways to stop metal theft

Municipalities are often the ones blamed by residents when traffic lights don't work or the electricity fails. But, says Rens Bindeman, Technical Advisor for the South African Revenue Protection Association (SARPA), there are practical steps they can take to limit the activities of metal and cable thieves.

1. The Second Hand Goods Bill requires scrap yards to be in an area zoned for business to be registered. This means that informal 'bucket shops' in residential areas will be illegal. Municipalities need to visit scrap yards to ensure they comply with zoning, and also with health and safety regulations.
2. Municipal officials can speak to police station commissioners to ensure they are complying with the new regulations and policing scrap yards correctly and effectively. They can contact SARPA for assistance in this regard.
3. Municipalities can work much more closely with the police, particularly in the exchange of information, since in the future there should be a dedicated person at each police station dealing with second hand goods and scrap metal regulation.
4. There needs to be commitment from political and administrative roleplayers within the municipality, including all department heads. Metal theft does not just affect electricity or water, but also traffic services, metro police, the roads department and of course, finance.
5. There needs to be a champion for the fight against metal theft, who should drive the campaign. Budget needs to be allocated.
6. A specialised unit should be properly resourced. An expert in non-ferrous theft is required to analyse the problem, and individuals identified for this team with experience in security or crime fighting, such as metro police or ex-reservists. The team needs to be trained and to hold joint operations with the police.
7. The unit will need someone with permission to speak to the media at any time. The community helps to fight crime, and information destroys the criminal. The campaign should develop a high profile, so that syndicates know that the municipality has become a 'hard target'.
8. Municipalities wanting to get involved with fighting metal theft should join SARPA or the NFTCC. This will give them access to specialists with the experience and the networks to deal with the criminals and the scrap yards, and to ensure that they are prosecuted and convicted. 'We can make a difference if everyone co-ordinates their efforts better, because this is a national problem.'



When local communities are unaware of the problem cable thieves can be particularly brazen, digging up cables in broad daylight in the middle of busy urban roads as in this example from Bloemhof.

MORE ABOUT

The Non-ferrous Theft Combating Committee (NFTCC)

Set up in 1993 by Telkom, Eskom and Spoornet to combat theft and damage to their infrastructure, the NFTCC was joined by Business Against Crime, which has recently taken over the active role from Eskom.

MORE ABOUT

The South African Revenue Protection Association (SARPA)

This body is working to combat electricity theft, and is more directly linked to municipalities. Through the NFTCC, it has also become more involved in combating non-ferrous and ferrous metal theft. In the past, bigger metros have worked directly with the NFTCC, rather than through SARPA, but with better co-ordination between the two, Rens Bindeman, SARPA's technical advisor, suggests that municipalities can now easily work through SARPA to get all the assistance they need.

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