

Copper/AC Theft Prevention

You've probably heard the Benjamin Franklin axiom that "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure". Most people attribute this to health, ole' Ben was actually talking about safety when he wrote this. He was referring to fire safety but safety, nonetheless. And perhaps this is a great truism that we should all adopt for church safety and security – for an ounce of prevention is truly worth at least a pound of cure in our churches.

This of course is almost always true when talking about theft prevention at our churches. Here we're talking about the theft of your air conditioner units and the copper inside them. Below I'm going to give you thirteen tips, tricks or techniques to prevent the theft of your commercial air conditioning units at your church.

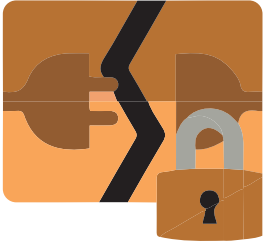
As protectors we must understand the routine activity theory: crime is likely to occur when three essential elements of crime converge in space and time: a motivated offender, an attractive target, and the absence of capable guardianship. For the protector, the more defensive mechanisms created to prevent the loss (of an outdoor air conditioner or heat pump), or the more you interrupt the elements of the routine activity theory, the greater chance you will have of preventing theft (of your copper or AC. Heating Units). Every little deterrent adds up to a thief skipping your HVAC equipment and going to the next unit that's easier to steal.

As copper prices fluctuate so does the theft of copper. It's been called an epidemic and the theft is not limited to air conditioners and heat pumps. Wire and plumbing are ripped out of homes and businesses both existing and new construction.

Anything you can do to stop thieves will save heartache, money, and dismay that these thieves impart to their victims. Below are some ideas that I have seen and recommended to churches when I conduct risk assessments.



Put A Lock on The Outdoor Unit(s) Power Disconnect/ Panel



An amazingly simple idea, but thieves, like most of us, freak out over electricity. If they don't have access to shutting off the power to the HVAC unit, then they may think twice before stealing your unit.

While it is true, the lock can be broken or cut off, the locked electrical box but adds one more layer of security. This combined with a few of the other deterrents helps to build a stronger defense.

There are a variety of disconnects, some have rather flimsy locking devices, but adding a lock is simple. Be sure to indicate on the electrical box that a key is available and what number should be called for access or you could get billed for a call back if someone needs to turn off the power.

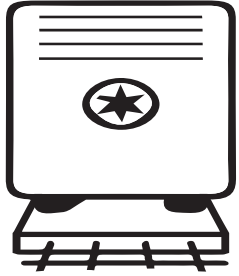
Install an Air Conditioner Security Cage with Locks



A remarkably simple, straight forward device to thwart the robber in his tracks. When copper thieves see a cage, they immediately know that time is not on their side. Remember most of these crimes are crimes of opportunity and if they are just stealing the copper, they need multiple thefts in a night to make a decent amount of money. Increasing their time also increases their risk – a cage may be all that is necessary for them to leave your church alone and pick on the next victim.

Cages are available on Amazon and can be installed by someone with a basic understanding of tools or get one installed from your local AC repair company. Just like with the security lock above, make sure the key to the locks is available when/ if you have maintenance on your unit.

Anchor your AC Unit to a Concrete Pad



The methods have changed somewhat with restrictions put upon the scrap metal recyclers. If the metal recycling outfits are honest then they have to purchase copper from legitimate businesses and not the toothless meth-head (no offense meth-heads, toothless or otherwise) off the street with a bundle of copper in his trunk.

So instead of stealing the copper out of the ac unit, now the process is to quietly approach the unit, disconnect the power and then snip the copper lines attaching the unit to the system, dumping all that ozone depleting freon into the atmosphere and take the entire unit all in about 4 minutes.

If they know the cost of that refrigerant, then these thieves may know enough to close the valves that isolate the gas into the outdoor unit and only dump the Freon that is in the copper lines going into the house. But that takes time and a little advanced training. The resale value of a used heat pump typically exceeds the value of the copper that can be ripped away from the unit. The main problems, especially with commercial units like those from churches is that they are heavy, take multiple people to move and require somewhat specialized equipment like a dolly and a truck bed to put it in. Remember, as their risk goes up, the more likely they are to move on to someone that isn't as proactive as your church.

This anchoring can be done by someone with a basic understanding of tools, but this may be best done by a professional as the unit will usually need to be lifted in some manner to get the anchors set.

Install Motion Activated Lighting



Thieves, like cockroaches hate bright lights. It prevents them from having a cloak of secrecy they desire to carry out their crime. Motion activated lighting will let your thief know that you had forethought in prevention and may be enough of a deterrent to send them looking for a darker or less light unit.



Add a Security System or Add to Your Existing One



COTS or commercial off the shelf security cameras have continued to improve in capabilities and features year over year and their prices have come into reach of the average consumer. Warehouse store like COSTCO and Sam's Club sell them and often have multi camera packages with cameras that are able to be monitored remotely and even give two-way talk ability.

Nothing deters a criminal more than realizing they were caught and you telling them that the police are on the way. Plus, the replay makes for a great entertainment if you catch them and scare them off – of course this is good for law enforcement use as well.

Do some research and find a solution that works for your church.

Keep All Gates Locked That Secure Your AC Unit



Just a little common sense here and another barrier for the clowns to cross. It's less likely that they'll bust through a locked gate or jump over the fence to steal a commercial size air conditioner unit. Criminals usually prefer free range of movement during their crime.

A gate may be too much of a confined space for them. One caveat – if the unit is collocated inside and area where children play remember to remove locks on egress gates in the event of an emergency. Replace the locks once the children have left the area.



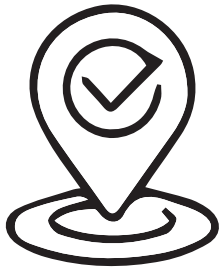
Have a Dedicated Alarm for Theft of an Outdoor Unit



You can get as crazy with these as your budget will allow. Some include a dual tone outdoor or indoor siren with an option for a Volt DC Relay to add another siren. Tampering switches to detect excessive vibration or movement of the condensing unit to notify owners.

Condensing Unit alarm systems sound a loud siren and trigger a central alarm, phone dialer, or other device while allowing you to monitor up to four units with one panel. Just a cursory search online will find a lot of options. Talk to your AC company for their recommendation.

GPS Tracking Installed on The Unit



This is also another idea that can get as crazy as your budget will allow for. Commercial asset tracking can be costly and the juice may not always be worth the squeeze – meaning, have someone like Protector's Toolkit conduct a risk assessment of your church. We measure physical security and let you know if the crime stats for your area would support a costly solution like using asset tracking for your AC Units.

Practice Good CPTED Principles – Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design

This is essentially removing bushes and brush away from your AC Unit(s). Two reasons for clearing the area around an air conditioner or heat pump. The main reason is obviously to not give these clowns anywhere to hide while conducting their business. The other is condensing units need lots of air to work efficiently.



Bluffing - Have A Sign Posted “AC Protected by Alarm”



Make sure your signs look authentic. Burglars may be stupid for stealing air conditioners, but they know a fake sign when they see one. Obviously, you want to make sure you aren't violating any trademarks but a professional sign is relatively easy to make and post – as well as fake security cameras.

Paint All Accessible Copper in Your Outdoor Unit

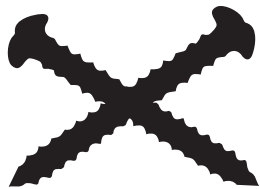


Be careful, wear gloves and turn off the power. You can use spray paint, engraving or other ways to distinctively mark the copper tubing in your unit so that thieves will have a much more difficult time selling it.

Grab a friend and have them assist you to hold the top of the AC after you remove it from the unit. It will be attached by the wires to the motor and will be easier for a helper to hold while you paint the copper inside the condensing unit. Use a bright neon paint that will be easy to spot. That brightly colored copper may also be a deterrent for a would-be thief. It may also deter the buyers from buying the copper.



Get Some Tamper Proof Screws



Anything to slow down the adversary. Tamper proof screws can be used to secure a few strategic positions on the AC unit to slightly discourage a theft. Search the internet for tamper proof screws and you'll find a huge selection.

A trip to your local hardware store and a quick explanation of what your project in should produce the results you're looking for. Remember, you're trying to make it difficult for the thief to open the housing for your unit.

Establish a Watchman program at your church



Our nation is built on the strength of our citizens and so are our churches. Every day, we encounter situations calling upon us to be the eyes and ears of law enforcement. Not only does a Watchman Program allow members to help in the fight against crime, it is also an opportunity for volunteers to bond through service.

The Watchman program is simple in concept and execution. It requires a dedicated, vetted cadre of safety and security team members that have good situational awareness and problem-solving skills. They are scheduled by the safety and security team leader for dates and times (determined by the church), to walk around and patrol the church property.

Join the Protector's Toolkit Membership for our lesson and forms to create a successful Watchman Program!

There you have it – tips, techniques, and strategies for HVAC theft prevention. I hope this blesses you and compliments your other prevention strategies at your church. For more church safety and security development with actionable strategies and training visit: **ProtectorsToolkit.com** and join our online membership. The only membership of it's kind that partners with you to Build, Develop and Lead your safety and security ministry!