

Protecting Commercial Air Conditioning Units

Commercial air conditioning (A/C) units have become tempting targets for thieves because of rising copper prices. Thieves can rip out the copper coils from the units and sell the copper at salvage yards. While the price of copper has dropped recently, news reports suggest that A/C unit thefts are still occurring frequently.

The Problem

The copper in A/C units are tempting targets for theft or vandalism. A/C units are almost always located where they are not easily visible to the public, such as on roofs and at the rear of stores, so criminals can work surreptitiously. Also, the parts do not contain serial numbers, making it almost impossible to identify the copper.

While thieves can get a couple of hundred dollars for the stolen copper, the cost for replacing or repairing the damaged A/C unit(s) is significantly higher – depending on the size of the unit, replacement costs can be in the tens of thousands of dollars. For some commercial businesses, loss of air conditioning could also lead to loss of business, resulting in business interruption losses, and damage to temperature-sensitive goods.

A/C equipment on job sites that has been installed, or is awaiting installation, is also attractive to thieves. Similarly, there have been reports of residential A/C units, particularly in multi-family residential buildings, being stolen or vandalized - some of the security measures discussed for commercial A/C units also may be applicable to residential units.

What Can Be Done?

Protecting commercial A/C units from theft or vandalism involves making the units more visible, securing access to the units, and providing an alarm system for supplemental protection.

Protective Lighting

Installing protective lighting over the unit that is controlled by a motion detector or proximity sensor would provide a strong deterrent. The lighting fixture should be vandal resistant and installed high enough that it is not readily accessible.

Physical Protection

Creating a security zone around the unit, such as through the use of a chain link fence or cage, would serve to limit access to the unit. It should be noted that this is a measure recommended by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) as a means of protecting building air intakes from airborne chemical, biological, or radiological attacks.

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Alarm Protection

Providing alarm protection in the form of a loud sounding siren or bell would serve to scare off the burglar and alert the police, a neighbor, or a passerby. An alarm company should be consulted as to the type of device (i.e., sensor) that can be used to protect A/C equipment.

Roof-top Units

For units located on a roof, a first step would be to prevent access onto the roof, followed by the measures recommended above. Measures to prevent access to roofs can include: removing or otherwise securing the access ladder(s) to the roof; relocating away from walls equipment, such as dumpsters, that can be climbed on to gain access to the roof; and installing bollards so criminals cannot park a vehicle close to a building wall and use it as a climbing aid onto the roof.

Job-site Security

Theft prevention measures for A/C equipment on job sites include just-in-time deliveries, securing the delivered equipment before it is installed, and using security guards or other construction-site security measures to protect the job site.

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