

7 ON YOUR SIDE

7 On Your Side digs into where stolen copper wire actually ends up. Here's what we found



By [Carlos Granda](#)

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7 On Your Side is digging into where that stolen copper actually goes and speaking to one company trying to do things the right way.

We [went out with undercover investigators](#) along the Alameda corridor in Watts where there are a number of scrapyards. Right away we found evidence just lying on a street corner: a pile of insulation where the copper was stripped out.



For months, 7 On Your Side Investigates has looked into the copper wire thefts plaguing neighborhoods in Southern California. But where does it go?

An undercover investigator said: "Come down here at night and you'll see people burning it off because it's the bright shiny copper that has the value... it's everywhere."

Once the thieves strip out the copper, detectives say it disappears into a shadowy underground market.

Detectives say the material often changes hands multiple times, moving from unlicensed scrap yards to middlemen who ship it out of the country. Incredibly, it could end up right back here.

"It's going to go through an underground network... to someone who's going to buy it in bulk and that's gonna be overseas - China or India - where it's going to get melted down and repurposed into new copper wire. And it's likely gonna be re-sold here for new construction projects. So it's kind of its own cycle," said the investigator.

He took us to an area with a number of scrap recyclers. They say illegal buyers sometimes set up a temporary scale on a street and then people bring their copper and other metals. They are weighed on the spot, there is payment and then the person with the scale moves on.

"We've got a round the clock operation," says the investigator.

All this stolen copper - impacting our everyday lives.

ABC7 has done several stories about how AT&T customers have lost landline service throughout Los Angeles due to stolen copper wires.

In our last investigative piece, we showed you how sheriff's investigators are cracking down on illegal scrapyards across the county as copper wire theft continues to surge.

For business owner Barry Brucker, copper theft isn't just a headline - it's personal.

"Several months ago, they broke in over a weekend. They cut the power pole and then they came into our building, destroyed the building and eliminated all the water copper and our heavy power copper," said Brucker.

For 40 years, Brucker has operated an ink manufacturing business on Avalon Boulevard. It's near what is called an RV wasteland.

Business owners say the encampments have resulted in an increase of illegal dumping and copper theft.

Brucker said thieves took more than \$100,000 worth of copper.

"Our business interruption was horrible when they cut off all the power. To some extent, some of my building still doesn't have power," he added.

While many scrap yards cut corners, some are working to stop the problem before it starts. One of them is SA Recycling, a nationwide company that police point to as an example of compliance done right.

"Any phone cable that comes in is highly scrutinized... We look at all of that material to make sure it is phone cable, and then we ask the appropriate questions. We have to ask them, 'do you have a legal right to have this property?' If it belongs to a municipality or an agency, they have to provide us with documentation from that agency saying they're authorized to scrap that material," said Roger Young from SA Recycling.

At SA Recycling there are signs that clearly indicate items they will not accept. That includes phone cable.

Young said it comes down to following state law and asking the right questions - something not everyone does.

"Black market scrap receivers aren't asking the right questions, and they're not actually following state law where identification is required."

Even with responsible operators, investigators say the challenge is enforcement - for the entire county of Los Angeles there are just two full time investigators looking for copper wire and other metals that have been stolen. Resources are stretched thin.

That's why Brucker and other business owners are meeting with law enforcement to figure out how to stop the increase in thefts.

"To have Channel 7... cover this the way you do which we're so grateful," says Brucker.

Detectives say shutting down the black market depends on both stronger enforcement and honest recyclers who play by the rules. They say it's going to take cooperation - from police, recyclers and the public - to stop copper theft for good.



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