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In U.S., Metal Theft Plagues Troubled Neighborhoods

By CHRISTOPHER MAAG

CLEVELAND — Metal scrappers have attacked churches and ransacked homes in this Midwestern city, leaving entire neighborhoods uninhabitable.

Saint Theodosius Orthodox Cathedral here lost its insurance after a thief stole copper panels from the roof years ago. Three churches in Cleveland Heights have been stripped of copper gutters. And in the last few months, three churches in the North Collinwood neighborhood were stripped of copper downspouts.

“Our neighborhoods are being pillaged, not by Vikings or Goths, but by modern-day barbarians,” said Mike Polensek, North Collinwood’s City Council member. Even manhole covers and sewer drains are being stolen out of streets to be sold as scrap metal, Mr. Polensek said.

Houses, however, are the greatest targets of commodity scavengers in the United States. Neighborhoods depopulated by the rising tide of foreclosures make easy targets.

So many houses have been stripped of siding and copper pipes that neighborhoods must be abandoned and turned into green spaces, said Jim Rokakis, treasurer for Cuyahoga County, which includes Cleveland. “We have to pull out,” he said. “There’s nothing left.”

It is common for home builders and remodelers here to erect signs on plywood that read “All PVC pipes, no copper,” indicating a house has less expensive plastic piping.

In the last six months, the police in the city of Cleveland Heights have arrested two groups of scrappers who used government foreclosure lists to plot which houses to sack.

Scrap metal thefts began to soar 12 to 18 months ago. “There’s a direct correlation between the price of commodities and the number of metal thefts,” said Bruce Savage, spokesman for the Institute of Scrap [Recycling Industries](#).

The institute received 174 reports from the police around the country regarding metal thefts from Jan. 1 to March 28 of this year, a sharp increase over the period in 2007, and the actual number of thefts is much higher, Mr. Savage said.

Copper pipes, among the most commonly stolen items, are selling for just over \$3 a pound. The local police report bronze urns taken from gravestones and long sections of aluminum bleachers stolen from high school stadiums.

Catalytic converters in vehicles are also popular targets because they contain platinum, which this month sold for an average of \$1,900 an ounce.

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