

Controlling theft and vandalism on construction sites

Introduction

Construction companies are losing more than \$1 billion annually to equipment theft and vandalism. While you may not be able to keep professional thieves from stealing your property, you can make it extremely difficult for them.

Besides the direct costs, thefts can have indirect costs that can be devastating to a contractor as well:

- When stolen tools are not available when employees arrive at the job, delays will occur and inevitably production drops dramatically
- Contractors will buy “cheap” tools to cut losses. They tend to wear out quickly, break and have a negative impact on the morale of the workers

The following information covers key elements in reducing theft and vandalism to contractors' equipment on job sites.

Nine tips to better security

- 1) Where to begin: inventory
 - The first step in any protection program is to identify the equipment you have. An inventory should be made available for each job site. It is important to keep that information up to date and secure with a photo of the larger equipment. Newly purchased items should be entered immediately, and copies of the inventory should be kept in a safe location, both at the main office and on the job site. On new equipment, information that will aid in settlement and recovery includes: original date of purchase, original cost, age of equipment, manufacturer, serial number and location of serial numbers, and any unique features of the equipment item
 - One person should be assigned to maintain a tight inventory control of all materials and tools delivered, signing for each delivery only after carefully checking the invoice for shortages. Critical material should not be stored on the job site any longer than necessary. Pre-planning is essential
- 2) Get help from law enforcement
 - Before you break ground or move your equipment, you should meet with the local law enforcement agency. Give them the details of your project, type of construction, work schedule, starting time and expected date of completion. Names and phone numbers of key personnel and contact information during non-working hours are also essential. Keep the police posted on critical materials and unusual job site activities that might require their attention. Tell the police how your equipment is specially marked for identification
 - Ask the local law enforcement agency to conduct a crime prevention survey of your site. If you are going to use security personnel, it is sometimes good public relations to hire off-duty law enforcement personnel. Be sure that security guards are licensed and obtain a certificate of workers' compensation and liability insurance from them. Require guards to use a watch clock to record patrol rounds. Carefully check the backgrounds and qualifications of any private security guard firms
- 3) Speak out on theft!
 - When an employer doesn't clearly state opposition to theft and act to prevent it, they are subject to more theft. Consider the following:
 - Conduct meetings and provide handouts to let employees know you expect honesty on the job site
 - Encourage employees to suggest and assist in solving problems and providing solutions

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- Explain your policy on “gray areas” such as taking scrap lumber or cut-off pipes, personal use of company cars or borrowing tools for overnight or weekend use
 - Ask employees to report theft to management via a phone number that they can use after hours and on weekends
- 4) Involve neighbors in watching your job site
- Take a look at your job site in the same way that a thief will look at it. Review your job site from across the street. Look at the neighborhood. Do you know your neighbors? If you solicit their help in a friendly way, neighbors and their children can become efficient watchdogs of your project during evening hours and on weekends. A neighbor who pays attention to happenings on your site can be a great deterrent
 - Contact neighbors and let them know what will be happening, keep them informed and let them know how construction will benefit them. Don't overemphasize your concern about stopping crimes. Stress the way you are promoting safety so their children won't be tempted to play in the area and get hurt
 - Pass out “flyers” with photos of equipment to nearby neighbors. Offer rewards for information on any persons vandalizing, stealing, tampering with equipment, or attempting to steal equipment on job sites
 - A videotape camera system not only deters crime, but also identifies and aids in the prosecution of the persons who may vandalize or steal from your job sites. Even a “dummy” camera will assist in preventing losses, however, only superintendents should know if the camera is not really recording
 - How is the lighting on your site at night? Park equipment in clear view of the public and in well-lit areas, or provide lights. Do they shine toward the road, blocking observation? Or do they shine into the site, lighting up what is there? Light is one of the cheapest kinds of security, but it only works when it is used effectively
- 5) Mark your equipment
- Even if you are certain the machine belongs to you, positive proof is a legal requirement to reclaim it. Keep written records of all vehicle identification numbers (VINs) on equipment and keep a color photo of each unit
 - Use a hardened steel punch, etching tool or engraver to duplicate the serial numbers in at least two places – one obvious and one hidden. Paint can be stripped; engraving cannot. An electric engraver can be purchased for around \$10. Record the locations and the numbers. Post warning notices on the machines advising that all VINs have been recorded. If your equipment is stolen and recovered in another town or state, police can trace ownership back to you and you can make positive identification
 - Consider painting equipment a different color to aid in identification
 - Mark the tops of cabs or ROPS to aid in aerial identification
 - Immobilize equipment by removing the rotor or lowering the blade or bucket. Remove the battery and electric starting system, particularly when the equipment is not used daily. Use concealed ignition cut-off switches, fuel line and system locks, and hydraulic cylinder locks when possible
 - Do you use your crane as a security system? Never hook up items such as torches, generators, or gang boxes and store them 50 feet in the air on a crane. The hoist line flexes back and forth at one spot and this accelerates wear on the cable and the equipment - not to mention the possibility of the local kids pretending to be construction workers, gaining access to your crane, engaging a clutch, and dropping all of your tools, a generator, a welder, etc
 - Install alarms or anti-theft devices such as fuel cutoffs, hydraulic bypasses, track locks, hydraulic arm locks, arm locks, etc. Post signs/stickers warning that vandals will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. Reporting crimes to prosecution is the best deterrent to future crimes

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- New technology in global positioning devices can be used in tracking equipment. This may be cost prohibitive now, but may be a viable option in the near future
 - There are companies that can provide invisible marking on your tools and equipment along with warning signs that can be used as a powerful deterrent and can be key in recovery
 - There are also police recovery systems for vehicles stolen on job sites or elsewhere. A small radio transceiver is hidden within the equipment. If the vehicle is reported stolen, it can be tracked to its location. This may, however, only be available in certain areas of the United States
- 6) Release keys to supervisory personnel
- Controlling keys is an essential element in limiting access to designated areas. Limit the number of persons to whom responsibility of “key control” is given
 - Keep an updated log listing the type of key issued, to whom, on what date and for what purposes. Keep all un-issued keys under lock, and keep extra keys to a minimum
 - Change your locks periodically. Considering the potential losses involved this simple act is well worth the time and money. Extra security locks, such as those having changeable combinations, may be the answer. To prevent unauthorized duplication, “plug” keys with a rivet through the bow as a means of preventing alignment needed for machined duplication
- 7) Use appropriate hardware:
- Select padlocks that do not have exposed shackles. Padlocks with exposed shackles are easily cut with bolt cutters. Never leave a padlock hanging around in the open position. Thieves can exchange your lock for one of their own
 - If your locks and keys have been imprinted with matching numbers by the manufacturer, use steel wool to remove the numbers for the locks. Depending on the type of lock, thieves may be able to use a lock number to have a key made to fit the lock. Develop your own numbering system to replace the manufacturers’ numbering system
 - If using mobile trailers, use heavy gauge padlocks that are covered. Use fifth wheel locks and equipment windows with bolted steel burglar bars
- 8) Control access and check your employees!
- Obviously, you should have your site fenced. The weakest point of most chain-linked fences is at the bottom. A fence not secured to posts or a bottom wire can be lifted and rolled under. If you cannot use chain link fencing, consider 48-inch orange netting. While it will not stop a trespasser from crossing, it does define the perimeter of the construction site
 - Is your site posted to warn trespassers to keep out? In most states, the police may have no authority to challenge or arrest trespassers if the site is not posted. The AGC can provide signs that notify the public of rewards for information leading to arrests for thefts from your site
 - Are you controlling vehicle traffic inside your perimeter? By designating a parking area for personal vehicles, you can control where the vehicles go. Many thefts of tools and equipment are performed by a company's own workers. If you want to keep tools from straying into the trunks of cars, keep the cars separate from the work area!
 - Do background checks on employees prior to hiring them. Pre-employment drug screening is a must.

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- 9) Have an equipment program
- Implement an Equipment Accountability Program. Make supervisors, foremen and employees responsible for equipment losses. Monitor the program once a year and update when needed
 - No matter how small the loss from theft or vandalism, report all incidents to law enforcement officials. The information you supply to them promptly may save your job site from a repeat visit or discourage the vandals or thieves from striking another one of your projects. Occasionally, have your superintendent go back to the job site 20 minutes or so after work stops. Many times, thieves will “case” the job and steal directly at the end of the workday
 - At least annually, review your security program. Look for ways to strengthen it even if you are having success in preventing thefts or vandalism

Conclusion

An equipment theft program can make a huge difference in whether or not your job site will be attacked by vandals or thieves. Planning ahead and implementing a few items noted above will be an important factor in equipment theft. Never underestimate a thief!

References

LC Loss Control Services Bulletin Contractors' Equipment: A guide to better security

Associated General Contractors Superintendents' Guide to Theft and Vandalism Prevention, Washington D.C.

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