

BauWatch

Unseen Threats: 2024 Construction Crime Index



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Are we in the grip of a theft epidemic?

Construction sites are ripe targets for theft, with valuable machinery, materials, tools, and appliances at every turn. High turnover rates of staff, the comings and goings of subcontractors, the mobility of the workforce, and the temporary nature of project work, meanwhile, make them easy targets for crime.

Theft is a huge challenge that, according to the latest industry calculations, costs the UK construction industry at least £800M¹ a year - not including incidents that go unreported². And with sustained inflation increasing the price of goods, and the cost-of-living crisis putting pressure on purse strings, our research indicates that the situation is becoming untenable.

Out of the 500 construction site workers surveyed in our “Unseen Threats: 2024 Construction Crime Index” survey, two-thirds of people (62%) agreed that it has increased

in the last year (2023). On the other hand, just 2% reported that it had decreased.

The cadence of crime is also more shocking than many will have realised, with approximately 70% of respondents confirming they had witnessed theft on-site at least once a year, and a fifth (19%) saying they experience it every few months. Astonishingly, one in three individuals said they had been regularly approached by people wanting to ‘sell things off the back of a lorry’, exposing the appetite for the re-sale of materials and the brash approach criminals are willing to take.



“We surveyed people working across commercial projects, real estate, energy, infrastructure, and homebuilding projects. With 7 in 10 people admitting to seeing theft at work, the key takeaway is that no site or sector is safe from criminals”

– Alexis Potter, Managing Director BauWatch UK/IR



£800M

Cost of theft to the construction industry each year

To add insult to injury, criminal tactics also seem to be improving - six in ten people (62%) feel that construction crime has become more sophisticated in recent times. This echoes reports in 2023 from farmers that drones and social media are now being used to “scope out” farms before vehicles and equipment are taken³.



70%

of respondents had witnessed theft on-site at least once a year

The financial fallout from just one strategically planned heist can be crippling, so firms must be able to protect themselves against what’s to come. But its relative invisibility makes theft difficult to prevent.



This study aims to uncover the real-world consequences of construction theft, drawing from firsthand experiences of people working on sites. It will also investigate who’s behind the offences, and offer practical, steadfast advice to companies about how to safeguard their people and assets.

1. Building site theft costs £800m. (2005, January 31). Housebuilder Magazine. 2. Crime in the construction industry. (2022). The Chartered Institute of Building. 3. Wace, C. (2021, July 18). Thieves snoop on us with drones, say farmers. The Times.

A hidden productivity drain

As expected, crime has significant financial consequences for firms – largely due to delays - a problem that our survey brings into sharp focus.

In our survey, around three in ten people reported crime-related delays on projects they had been involved with. Of that figure, a quarter of respondents experienced delays of over four weeks, causing considerable disruption to construction timelines. Concerningly, in one in ten cases, projects could not continue at all.

Utilities search provider, Cornerstone Projects, estimates that construction delays can cost anywhere from 10-50% of the total cost of build⁴. Given this bill is coming in addition to the original cost, it's easy to see how badly theft impacts bottom lines, either subtly or overtly. Delays are also hugely damaging to a company's reputation and relationships.

In 2023 it was reported that construction companies in the UK have gone out of business at the highest rate in a decade. This was due to persistent cost inflation, a slowdown in housebuilding, and delays to government infrastructure projects⁵. At a time when firms are struggling financially, even relatively minor incidents can deliver the crushing final blow – especially if the resources in question cannot be easily replaced.



31%
of projects have been delayed due to construction crime



24%
of stolen goods are vehicles or expensive machinery

“When viewed in isolation, it’s easy to underestimate crime’s impact. Yet when we look at the data in the round, we see that the costs and delays add up and this has the potential to make it harder to meet project deadlines. Construction projects always operate on paper thin margins – and a small incident can have an outsized impact.”

– Annabel Hiatt, Senior Category Manager, Travis Perkins

Small raids amount to huge numbers

It's not just delays that impact costs – companies also need to pay to replace what's taken. But what's desirable to thieves is not necessarily obvious, making it even trickier to stop them.

Surprisingly, we found that while expensive machinery is attractive, it makes up just 12% of the overall items most stolen from sites. Vehicles (cars and vans) also make up 12%. In only 6% of cases, the cost of goods stolen surpassed £10,000 in a single incident.

But in two thirds of cases (64%) the cost of stolen items totalled between £500 - £4,000, showing how quickly “minor” offences could add up if repeat patterns are not spotted.

Poor security impacts site morale

Small tools are the most common item to be taken - most likely because they are easier to steal and sell discreetly. This aligns with findings from a survey by NFU Mutual in June 2023, which showed an increase in theft on construction sites in the UK relating to personal property.⁶

For staff and tradies, the knock-on effect can be extremely frustrating, with a quarter (25%) finding themselves out of pocket after replacing personal equipment. Unsurprisingly, the same number said that losing tools is their ‘biggest fear’ when it comes to poor on-site security. This could show that some either felt personally responsible or were concerned about employability on future projects and reiterates the importance of ensuring all staff on site understand security procedures.

4. Cornerstone Projects. (n.d.). Construction Project Delays: A Comprehensive Guide.

5. UK construction companies go under at fastest rate in a decade. (n.d.). Financial Times.

6. Mutual, N. (2023, June 28). Rise in equipment theft. Insurance for the Trade Industry | Business Insurance NFU Mutual.





“Britain’s rail network is designed to be fail-safe, which means that when a cable is cut trains are brought to a standstill. This protects passengers but can lead to lengthy, frustrating delays while the problem is found and fixed safely”

– Network Rail



Copper and cable are priority targets

Copper is a vital material in short supply, so it’s always been attractive to thieves. However, its value is increasing, due to the role it’s playing in the energy transition. We need copper for wind turbines, solar panels and electric cars so it’s no surprise that over a third (35%) of people surveyed said it was a highly desirable stolen ware.

Copper is relatively easy to grab - at BauWatch, we’ve seen criminals simply pull up alongside unattended coils, load it into a van, and drive away in the space of a minute. Worryingly though, we notice that it is often left unguarded on sites.

Cable is also regularly targeted by criminals and our data shows 31% of respondents cited it as commonly stolen. This is typically taken from railways and telecommunication sites and has long been a challenge for

those industries to control. However, media coverage of high-profile projects such as HS2 has also helped to raise the profile of construction work, turning vulnerable railway construction sites into a ‘cash cow’ for thieves. In the Wales and Borders route alone, the theft of metal, particularly cables, has cost the taxpayer £1.1 million since January 2023.⁷ In July 2023, Network Rail and British Transport Police doubled the arrests of cable theft criminals in response.⁸

Given that these works take place in highly exposed areas that are difficult to cordon off, preventing theft remains difficult. Yet, as the price of materials skyrockets, companies need to be extra vigilant and ensure they are reviewing their security protocols regularly.

Poor security perpetuates crime

Robust site security is the best way to prevent theft, yet our study revealed a distinct lack of confidence in both the pre-emptive measures taken by contractors and the reaction times of security firms.

Over a third of construction professionals we spoke to said that security had been a ‘low priority’ on sites they had worked on. That’s despite almost half (47%) stating that companies should think about security measures before construction begins.

When crimes do occur, our survey found that response times and post-event support by security firms were problematic. Just one in ten professionals described the pace of response times as ‘excellent’ and nearly one in five (17%) rated their experience with security firms as either poor or very poor. Over a third described them as ‘average’ - figures that point to an industry in desperate need of a security overhaul.

When asked why construction sites experienced such poor attitudes and strategies towards security, 17% claimed this was due to budget restraints; 12.5% believed it was due to companies underestimating the risk, with the same number putting this down to poor planning before work begins.

7. 12Atkins, M. (2023, July 12). [Network Rail and British Transport Police double arrests of cable theft criminals](#). Rail UK. 8. Ibid.

35%

of respondents cited copper as a common item for construction site theft

31%

said cable is a common item for construction site theft

34%

say security is a low priority on sites they work on

47%

said companies should think about security measures in advance

Know your enemy

So, who are the perpetrators? In this section, we'll cover the three main groups that tend to target construction sites.

Insiders

Perhaps the most difficult type of thief to catch is the insider, who is responsible for just over a quarter (27%) of thefts, according to our research.

Construction sites are usually teeming with subcontractors or tradespeople, contracted for specific elements of a project. This makes it easy for thieves to pose as 'legitimate personnel' and not arouse suspicion - last year's copper heist at Aurubis⁹ is believed to be the work of insiders, for instance.

Yet, on large construction projects, with many temporary workers, it can be difficult to enforce a stringent site-access policy so many firms do not know how to stop the problem. All these ingredients are a recipe for disaster.

27%
of thefts are carried out by an insider

40%
of crime is carried out by opportunists

Opportunists

Opportunistic crime is the most common way that theft occurs, according to 40% of respondents. These are thieves looking for easy-to-grab items that have been left out on display, such as spare fuel or cabling. They tend to look for targets that are easy and quick to break into rather than planning a break-in and preying on the misfortune or forgetfulness of others.

15%
of crime is committed by organised criminals

Organised criminals

Then you have organised criminals - smart, savvy gangs with the preparation, manpower and equipment to take big-ticket items, or several things in one go. Our survey indicates that they're responsible for around 15% of crimes. They usually operate at night, and in fact, 69% of workers we surveyed believe that construction crime is more common during autumn and winter due to longer evenings. That said, it's not unheard of for professional criminals to walk onto sites off the street, dressed as workers, and take items in broad daylight. They're often well-versed, have planned escape routes, and take advantage of lax site-access policies.



“Since the Government removed the construction industry’s access to red diesel, fuel theft has risen exponentially. CCTV has therefore become an even more important tool for tackling site crime, not only because it acts as a deterrent and helps collect video evidence but because it also offers an insight into how and where a site might be better protected.”

– Rico Wojtulewicz, Head of Policy and Market Insight at the National Federation of Builders

69%
of people believe that construction crime is most common in the Autumn and Winter

9. Steinberg, J. (2023, September 1). Massive Metals Theft Reported at Europe's Largest Copper Producer. WSJ.

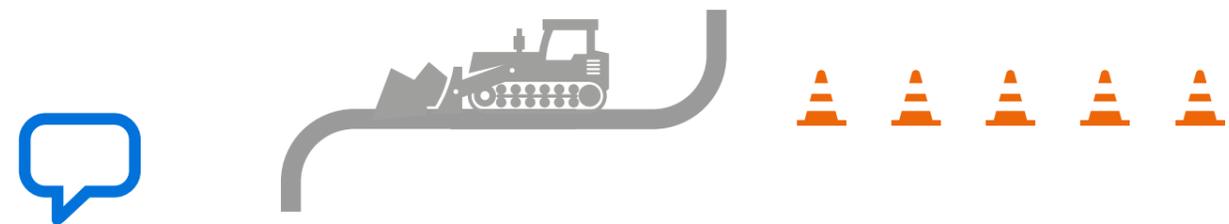
Recommendations

A potential spike in crime is just over the horizon. So what action can you take right now?



Use deterrents

It's far easier to prevent a crime from happening than to resolve it afterwards. Visible measures, such as CCTV towers and temporary fencing act as effective deterrents, because most opportunistic thieves will be put off taking spur-of-the-moment chances. In our research, fixed security cameras came back as the most popular security measure, with nearly half of the respondents (46%) relying on them as a form of defence. Well-lit sites can also deter thieves from entering, so illuminate dark corners where trespassers might go unnoticed.



Communicate clearly

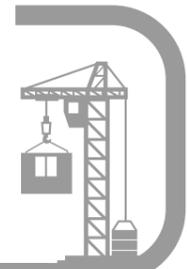
Clear communication and regular, systematic training help empower teams to safeguard construction sites. The importance of site security has to be clearly demonstrated to your team with a standardised site induction, and training records should be maintained digitally and physically. Each session should include a security angle, with informal toolbox talks at every site.

Remind teams of straightforward best-practice measures like removing keys from machinery, storing them in locked boxes, and ensuring that gates are locked to prevent easily avoidable incidents. Adding to this, teams in the field must make security providers aware of working patterns, especially when things change, to prevent false alarms.




Invest in security

Construction projects are immensely expensive, so there's a reluctance to spend more cash than seems necessary at the start. Yet this approach is short-sighted and the financial fallout can be so much worse. Investing in security should be seen as an insurance policy - it's a way to keep both equipment and staff safe. You wouldn't take the risk at home so why do it at your place of work? It's a logical decision and one that costs less in the long run.

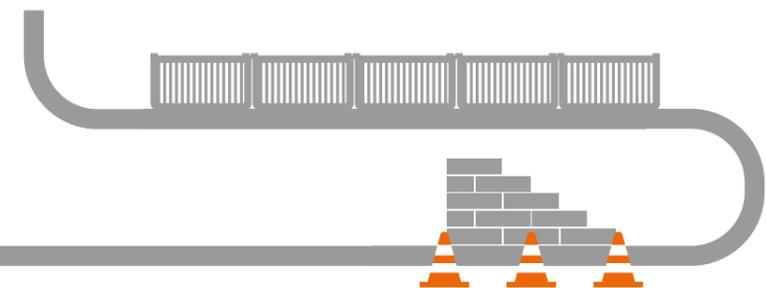


Be agile

All projects work on an evolving timeline, so each project's threat level must be assessed and adjusted accordingly. For example, housebuilders wrapping up a project may have an increased number of fitting tools on site, as well as costly items such as boilers, creating additional risk. Firms might want to rethink their security



around public holidays, when sites may be left empty and vulnerable. A traffic light system can be an effective solution here. Red lets your team know that the threat level is high, whether that is because of easily lifted or valuable assets, multiple subcontractors and personnel on site, or something like a broken chain-link fence.



Unseen Threats: 2024 Construction Crime Index survey

The survey was conducted in October 2023 using a third-party research provider (OnePoll). People who work on UK construction sites were asked general demographic questions regarding their age, gender, job level, sector, and the number of employees in their organisation. The sample consisted of 500 construction industry professionals, working across commercial construction (31%), commercial real estate management (11%), energy (30%), homebuilders and renovation (23%) and infrastructure (5%).

What, if any, are the most common items stolen from construction sites in your experience? [Select up to five]

	%
Small tools	39%
Copper	36%
Power tools & handheld equipment e.g., drills, levelling tools	33%
Cable	31%
Fuel	20%
Personal effects, e.g., phones, PPE	20%
Timber	19%
Steel	16%
Fixtures and fittings e.g., bath/taoilet, curtain rails	16%
Pipework/ducting	15%
Bricks or blocks	14%
Vehicles e.g., vans or cars	12%
Household appliances e.g., boiler, cooker	12%
Heavy machinery e.g., digger/excavator	12%
Roofing tiles	10%
Not sure/none in particular	2%
N/A - I have never experienced this	8%

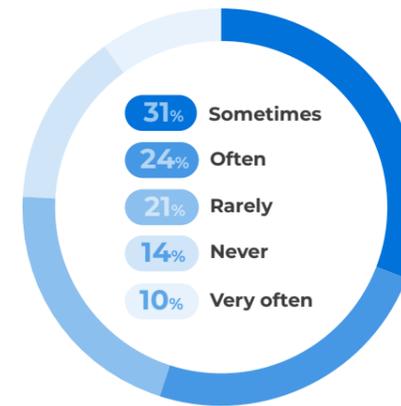
How often do you or site management review and update security measures?



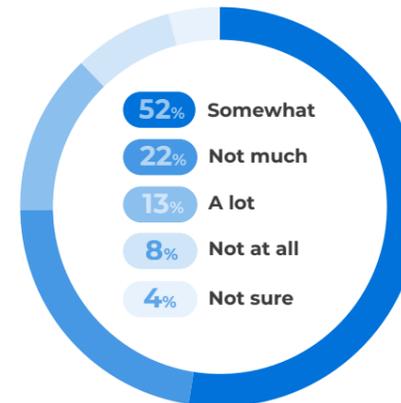
Thinking of a time where goods or materials were stolen from a site you worked on, what was the estimated cost of the theft? [Answer to the nearest £]

	%
0-500	8%
501-1,000	18%
1,001-2,000	19%
2,001-3,000	15%
3,001-4,000	9%
4,001-5,000	8%
5,001-10,000	8%
10,001-20,000	2%
20,001-50,000	2%
50,001-100,000	1%
More than 100,000	1%
Not sure/can't remember	8%

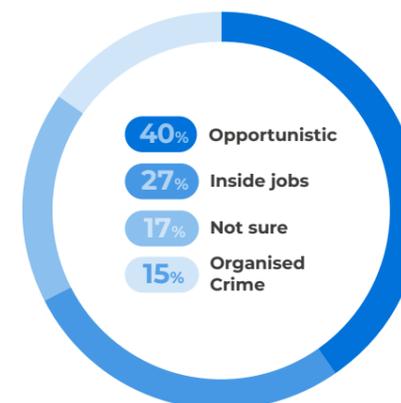
How often have you or other people on the sites you work on been approached by people wanting to 'sell things off the back of a lorry' for the project you're working on?



How much, if at all, do you believe that the pressure to stick to a budget, leads to cutting corners with security?



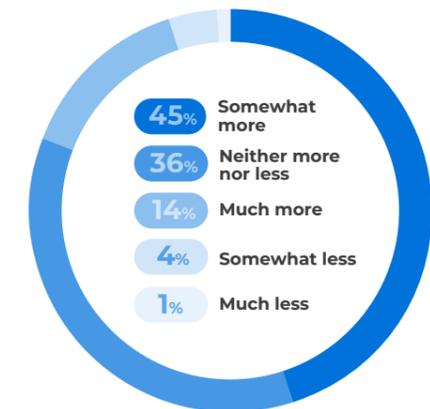
In your opinion, what is the most common type of crime experienced on sites? [Select one]



In which, if any of the following ways has construction crime impacted a project/work that you were doing? [Select all that apply]

	%
The project went over budget	34%
The project was delayed	34%
Material substitutions had to be made	28%
Workers were out of pocket because they had to replace their personal equipment	28%
People lost work because of the incident	25%
The project was unable to continue	13%
People were harmed physically or mentally by the crime	6%
None of the above	10%

Based on your experience of construction crime in recent years, is it becoming more or less sophisticated?



In your opinion, has construction site crime increased or decreased in the past year? (This is the theft of building materials, equipment, machinery, tools, along with other crimes such as physical violence, harassment, vandalism)

	%
Significantly increased	17%
Somewhat increased	45%
Stayed the same	31%
Somewhat decreased	4%
Significantly decreased	2%

BauWatch

About BauWatch

The UK & Europe's leading brand for temporary, powered & solar CCTV hire at construction sites and vacant properties. We take over all aspects of site security so that our customers do not have to. Our customised solutions combine highly visible video technology that misses nothing on site, with a control centre that acts quickly and competently anytime, day or night.

Contact

Telephone

0808 189 7932

Email

info-UK@bauwatch.com

Visit

www.bauwatch.com

