

Detroit man killed in attempted copper theft

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A 34-year-old Detroit man was electrocuted while apparently attempting to strip copper from a transformer on a utility pole Tuesday night. The accident, reported briefly by local news, is an indication of the desperate social conditions across the city.

According to WDIV-TV, the man's body was discovered still hanging from the pole by Detroit resident Cedric Moses as he was on his way home from work Wednesday morning. "We've been here for over 30 years and never seen anything like that," Moses said. "Oh my god, it's terrible, it's awful. We have kids coming through here all the time."

Around the base of the pole were multiple ladders at the time of the discovery, leading police to speculate that others had been assisting the man before he was electrocuted. A DTE line crew used a cherry picker crane to retrieve the man's body. His name and other details have not been released.

The DTE Energy-owned pole is located at the intersection of Putnam and Lawton Streets, a heavily blighted area in the city's west side. Only a few homes in the adjacent blocks are occupied. Most of the surrounding residential area is grown over by weeds and saplings, and nearby lots and former building sites stand empty.

Copper theft is an increasingly common occurrence in the city and throughout the country. According to the US Department of Energy, copper thefts cost the federal government \$1 billion per year; utility companies spend some \$60 million replacing stolen wiring and transformers.

Across the US, copper thefts have rendered freeways and neighborhoods dark in municipalities that are too budget-strapped to replace the wiring. The busy interchange of Interstates 64 and 75 in Lexington, Kentucky was left in the dark last December; Hawaii's major freeways have been similarly without lights for several years because of lack of funding to replace

stolen wire. Vallejo, California, left without functioning traffic lights at five major intersections, simply posted stop signs along with a warning: "Signal Lights are Non-Functioning Due To Copper Wire Theft."

In September, DTE reported having 4,000 feet of power lines stolen from a single location in Detroit. The incident is one of hundreds of other such thefts in the city. On September 29, the utility company announced it was more than doubling its reward for tips leading to the arrest of thieves. Both the city and state governments have implemented stricter regulations on scrap metal, but the laws have had no effect on the rising incidence of copper stripping.

The thefts are directly tied to the growth of extreme poverty and rising prices for scrap metals. Scrap copper currently sells for \$3.70 per pound, an increase of 50 percent over the past five years.

Shiny wire like that found in transformers fetches the highest price at scrap yards. Most of the high-quality metal is sold upward to the larger metal dealers, making its way to the Chinese industrial sector.

Scrap dealers will pay out between \$2.50 and \$3.00 a pound, a significant amount to the poor, but at a high risk to thieves. Last year across the US, at least 25 people died and hundreds of others were severely burned attempting to remove copper from power lines and substations.

An analysis of metal theft by the National Insurance Crime Bureau found high rates of metal theft across the industrial Midwest and Northeast, where there are a large number of abandoned factories and homes, older vehicles that can be stolen and dismantled, and higher rates of drug addiction.

In Detroit, the household poverty rate stands at 41 percent, and real unemployment is around 50 percent. As the economic distress deepens, the state has gutted safety net programs that serve the poorest people and established absolute time limits on cash welfare

assistance. This situation has compelled many residents to subsist on the informal economy, including odd jobs, babysitting and scrapping, and contributed to the high rates of drug use and petty crimes.

The huge proportion of abandoned and bank-owned properties in Detroit made scrapping a common phenomenon over the past few decades. Old factories have been stripped of metal to the point that many are unstable and dangerous to enter. Many vacant homes, schools, churches, and entire housing projects have been gutted of pipes, fixtures, and appliances.



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