

CABLE THEFT IS UNDERMINING BRITAIN'S RAIL NETWORK: IT'S TIME FOR A NEW SECURITY APPROACH

Cable theft is nothing new, but the resurgent trend in this crime is costing the U.K.'s rail network millions, disrupting passenger safety and freight reliability, and threatening the foundations of our critical national infrastructure. With over two decades of experience in protecting critical infrastructure, I've seen first-hand how serious this threat has become.

It was well publicized earlier this year that just weeks before the new electrified Wigan - Bolton line was set to go live, over £100,000 worth of high voltage cable was stolen, delaying its launch and disrupting services with huge knock-on effects. Sadly, this is not an isolated incident. Every stolen meter of cable has the potential to knock out critical signaling systems, risking train delays or worse, a serious incident caused by miscommunication between rail operators.

With Network Rail and British Transport Police reporting thefts costing taxpayers over £1 million in the Wales and borders route alone since 2023, if this doesn't justify urgent action, what does?

The weaknesses of our rail infrastructure are all too clear, not just to those of us working in security but to the criminals exploiting them. We have the problem of how to secure and protect remote, unsupervised areas where valuable cables are accessible and relatively easy to remove. There are long stretches with limited surveillance and organized criminal gangs are taking advantage of this.

What's happening on the network more recently, however, is different and more dangerous. Criminals have adapted their response to security methods through brazen impersonation of workers, conducting nighttime activity and the use of seemingly legitimate vehicles and tools that camouflage their intentions. Even opportunist amateurs have become professionals, in a highly organized operation.

The uncomfortable truth is that gangs

can bypass forensic marking, cameras and sensor alerts thanks to patchy and inconsistent methods and protocols, and so what we need is a pro-active, predictive approach to security cover across the whole network.

At First Response Group we specialize in infrastructure and have been carefully observing and learning first-hand the pattern of criminal trends and counter tactics. We've supported infrastructure providers across the U.K. in securing remote environments and high-risk zones, and we know what scalable protection looks like. What we are calling for, is the need for better coordination and smarter deployment of resources across the sector.

A predictive approach to security means using intelligence from drones and other surveillance tools, to analyze known hotspot areas and build systems through AI that can detect unusual behavior before a crime takes place. This tech-led approach should support physical patrols but will require better communication between rail operators, police and security companies to share intelligence, conduct joint training and integrate response systems.

This brings us to the biggest opportunity that we have, to secure the rail network for good. For this to work, there needs to be collaboration and creation of sustained partnerships between public infrastructure providers and private security experts.


Both sides bring innovation and industry specific expertise but without full alignment, we're only solving part of the problem, in isolation, and missing an opportunity to create a national, long-term infrastructure security model.

We should also put pressure on the legal consequences of cable theft, so that it is more in line with the increasing seriousness of the threat. Cable-theft crime is covered under the Theft Act 1968. Under section 7 of the Act, criminals convicted of theft can face imprisonment for up to seven years.

In 2024, three individuals were imprisoned for only 14 years between them, for a staggering total of 31 offences over a nine-month period. This means the risk-to-reward-ratio continues to favor the criminal in what many may consider a light sentence for stealing miles of BT Openreach copper cables valued at around £1m and causing disruption to hundreds.

Thefts on the rail network don't just delay the 2.8 billion journeys made by U.K. passengers each year; they derail the entire logistics chain. Freight operators rely on predictable scheduling, and every unplanned disruption hits supply chains and business confidence hard.

We must also remember that the rail industry supports over 700,000 jobs across operations, manufacturing, and the wider supply chain, and contributes more than £36 billion annually. Every pound invested in rail infrastructure delivers an estimated £2.20 in economic returns, making it one of the most impactful areas for long-term public investment, and when you put it like that, the imperative to protect it is clear.

Cable theft is no longer just a costly annoyance. It's a direct attack on the safety, resilience and sustainability of our rail network, and if we're serious about building a future-proof rail industry then our response must match the scale of the threat. We need to collectively act, and the sooner we do, the better protected we'll be because this is no longer optional, it's a national priority. 

About the Author

Barry Dawson is the group managing director of First Response Group, a U.K. leader in integrated security and facilities management provider to public and private sector clients across the U.K. With more than 35 years of experience in high-risk infrastructure protection, he talks here about a growing problem on the U. K.'s rail networks.