# UK’s £1.5 billion annual energy theft crisis fuels rising bills and safety risks



An estimated £1.5 billion worth of gas and electricity is stolen annually across the UK, contributing to increased costs for consumers and significant safety risks, industry experts have revealed. Investigations by energy companies in collaboration with police have uncovered large-scale criminal operations, particularly those linked to industrial cannabis farms and illegal cryptocurrency mining.

In one operation last November in Wigan, Greater Manchester, police officers and engineers raided a disused office building that had been converted into a sophisticated marijuana cultivation site. The building contained thousands of cannabis plants spanning several floors, complete with living accommodations such as a kitchen, television, beds, and even a treadmill. An engineer from the network operator Electricity North West, who took part in the raid, described the setup as “a proper setup... an incredibly professional set up on an industrial scale.”

This discovery followed abnormal power usage detected at a local substation, where sensors indicated unusually high energy loads during the night. Thermal imaging cameras confirmed that nearby buildings were unusually warm, prompting further investigation and police involvement. According to the engineer, energy theft is “a growing problem,” with around 900 related calls being handled monthly by the company. They emphasised the dangers involved, noting that “people lose their lives every year due to tampering” with electricity supplies.

Energy theft takes various forms, from tampering with domestic meters to rerouting underground cables directly from the network. The problem is exacerbated by both professional electricians and amateurs using online tutorials to bypass meters, often leading to hazardous situations. The engineer recounted situations where electrical meters had been rewired unsafely, with live wires exposed and no insulation, creating grave risks for occupants and emergency workers alike.

Gas theft also poses severe dangers, as highlighted by David Garner, director of safety at Cadent, the gas network company. He described how improper tampering with gas pipes can cause explosive leaks. Tragically, two to three years ago, a gas explosion resulting from theft not only destroyed a property but also led to the death of a young boy in an adjoining house. This case culminated in a 15-year prison sentence for Darren Greenham, who had cut a gas pipe to sell the copper while stealing gas through meter manipulation.

The involvement of organised crime is a significant factor in the energy theft crisis. Recent prosecutions in Liverpool saw eight individuals jailed for illegally diverting electricity to supply warehouses used as marijuana farms run by Albanian gangs. Paul Dutton, head of Electricity North West’s gas theft team, described these operations as sometimes brazen, with criminals posing as legitimate workers and even installing cables covertly in public spaces.

“People will walk past, day after day, and not have a clue about what’s going on behind the wall,” Dutton said, illustrating the secretive nature of these farming operations. Similar cases include an abandoned hotel in Blackpool hosting over 1,600 cannabis plants powered by bypassed meters, and a Lancashire smallholding illegally drawing electricity while cultivating marijuana.

Another emerging form of energy theft involves cryptocurrency mining, which demands vast electricity consumption. In the West Midlands in 2021, police investigated a site initially thought to be a cannabis farm but found 100 computers configured for bitcoin mining. That same year in Leicestershire, a trader was jailed for stealing electricity worth £32,000 to run bitcoin mining equipment.

These incidents impose financial burdens on consumers, with energy theft ultimately increasing household bills by an estimated £50 per year. Gavin Straughan, vice-chair of the UK Revenue Protection Association, stressed that regardless of motivations, energy theft is a criminal offence and affects honest billpayers by raising costs. He also highlighted how fraudulent schemes and misinformation circulating on social media exploit people struggling with energy payments.

Peter Smith, director of policy at the fuel poverty charity National Energy Action, echoed concerns about rising energy costs ahead of the April price cap increase. He urged those unable to afford bills to contact their energy suppliers rather than resort to illegal methods. “Nearly half of adults in Great Britain expect to ration their energy in the coming months,” he noted, highlighting the widespread financial strain.

An unnamed industry source involved in combating energy theft emphasised the priority of safety above financial recovery, stating, “I don’t particularly care about recovering the money, I care about saving lives.” The source described the relief and sense of achievement felt following interventions that prevented further harm.

The scale and complexity of energy theft in the UK underline an ongoing challenge for network operators and law enforcement alike. Efforts to combat this involve a mix of technological monitoring—such as analysing grid frequency changes to detect unusual power usage—and coordinated raids targeting criminal enterprises. As these activities continue, the impact on both utility infrastructure and community safety remains a central concern.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.stayenergysafe.co.uk/more-on-energy-theft/energy-theft-latest-facts-and-statistics> - This page provides statistics on energy theft in the UK, confirming the scale of the problem with over 11,500 reports received in 2023 and highlighting that energy theft is increasing, supporting the claim of a significant annual cost and rising incidents.
* <https://www.energy-uk.org.uk/publications/energy-theft/> - This Energy UK publication details the forms of energy theft, its associated dangers including fatalities, and the impact on consumers, corroborating the article’s points about meter tampering, risks of injury or death, and the link between energy theft and increased bills.
* <https://crimestoppers-uk.org/news-media/news/2023/oct/desperate-efforts-to-cut-energy-bills-puts-more-lives-at-risk-this-winter> - Crimestoppers reports a 68% increase in suspected meter tampering and energy theft, emphasizing the safety risks and supporting the article’s mention of growing energy theft concerns and dangers posed by tampering during recent years.
* <https://www.stayenergysafe.co.uk/more-on-energy-theft/energy-theft-a-comprehensive-guide> - This comprehensive guide discusses the various methods of energy theft, its prevalence, and the estimated cost to consumers of around £50 annually added to bills, directly supporting the article’s data on financial impact, theft techniques, and safety warnings.
* <https://www.ofgem.gov.uk/press-release/energy-regulator-steps-action-against-festive-fraud> - Ofgem’s press release highlights the estimated annual cost of energy theft between £830 million and £1.388 billion in Great Britain and notes the increase in theft amid the cost-of-living crisis, corroborating the article’s figures and context regarding the scale and financial burden of energy theft.