

(For immediate release)

Vandals and copper thieves costing taxpayers \$276m: research

Criminal damage against utility infrastructure around Australia has cost power companies and consumers \$276 million since 2023, according to research by Before You Dig Australia (BYDA).

In total, vandals were responsible for 2,300 attacks against telco and electricity assets in the same period, stripping valuable copper from power and fibre optic cables feeding homes, streetlights and community assets.

Vandalism is the seventh largest cause of utility damage nationally, with more than **15,000 reported utility strikes** each year in Australia – almost half of them against telco assets - costing the economy **\$4.6 billion**, although the true figures are likely to be 2-3 times higher.

“Copper thieves and vandals are dicing with death every time they attack a utility service,” BYDA CEO Mell Greenall said.

“What’s more, the cost in dollar terms and the cost of disruption to impacted communities, householders and businesses is simply unconscionable.

“The even bigger issue is that no one really talks about damage of any kind to underground utility services. Just because the assets are buried and therefore out of sight and out of mind does not mean we should be ignoring what we say is a ticking timebomb underneath our streets and footpaths.”

BYDA’s latest research report, [Australia’s Underground Utility Safety Reckoning](#), updates our original 2024 Economic Assessment of Utility Strikes in Australia, which calculated the indirect and social costs of utility repairs was 32.4 times higher than the direct cost of repairs.

Indirect and social costs include service interruptions, loss of income and business trade as well as environmental damage.

The Utility Safety Reckoning report examines why utility strikes persist and identifies practical reforms that governments can implement to significantly improve community and worker safety, infrastructure resilience and project productivity.



“Australia is well behind comparable jurisdictions such as France, Canada and the United States in the legal and regulatory frameworks governing utility safety and integrity,” Ms Greenall said.

“The problem in Australia is systemic rather than behavioural. While responsibility for preventing strikes often sits with frontline workers, the power to improve underlying conditions rests with governments, regulators, and asset owners.

“What we’re talking about is a 40-year-old system in a high-risk digital age. It is a fragmented information ecosystem that remains largely static and document-based, yet one with consequences for all.”

Where government leadership can make a difference

BYDA’s research consistently identifies several policy areas where government action can materially improve safety outcomes and reduce costly service disruptions, including:

1. **Nationally mandating a BYDA enquiry before excavation** within WHS, Electricity and Gas Regulations governing hazardous work. NSW is currently the only state that mandates the BYDA referral service, albeit only for electricity and gas.
2. **Improving the quality and accessibility of underground asset data**, including minimum standards and digital data sharing, which **could save \$782 million a year**.
3. **Using national data insights to support regulators**, enabling targeted enforcement, education, and industry improvement initiatives, consistency of legislation that **could save \$322 million pa**.

“These reforms do not require building a new system. Rather, they involve strengthening the legal and regulatory environment so the existing ecosystem can operate effectively. This is an immediate opportunity for government leadership,” Ms Greenall said.

“We must act now, before a major service outage or fatality. The research in this report highlights an unavoidable situation: incremental improvement will not be enough. Decisions must be made now to prevent what we see as an inevitable serious incident involving an underground service strike.

“If nothing changes, the next fatality or outage is not a surprise - it’s a choice.”

For further information, case studies or requests to interview BYDA CEO Mell Greenall, contact:

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About Before You Dig Australia

BYDA is a not-for-profit, industry-led organisation that operates Australia’s national “before you dig” referral service. Each year we facilitate more than 2.7 million requests for underground utility information from contractors, engineers, councils and the public. Our role is to connect those planning excavation with the asset owners responsible for critical infrastructure to prevent damage, disruption and injury. Read our latest research report [here](#).