

Crime in the construction industry



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Executive summary

It is not surprising that the most common forms of crime in the construction industry are theft, vandalism and health and safety neglect. These crimes contribute to the UK industry suffering millions of pounds worth of losses every year. These costs relate to not only the crimes themselves but also the resulting financial penalties, such as increased insurance premiums and project delays.

This research examines the scale and impact of crime on the construction industry and highlights the key areas of concern for senior level construction workers. Theft is the most common crime; 21% of respondents state that they experience theft each week and, overall, 92% are affected weekly, monthly or yearly. This indicates that the industry needs to seriously consider the prevention of theft and ensure that construction workers know how to deal with it appropriately.

The results also show that most respondents (90%) are aware of health and safety neglect occurring. 60% state that it happens at least monthly, which is particularly worrying considering the possible consequences of such neglect. The safety of employees should be of the highest priority in the construction industry; the survey reveals a clear need to investigate this issue further.

The construction industry is also susceptible to attack from organised crime, which can have a very severe effect on those targeted. It is often difficult to ignore or refuse these criminal demands, whether they involve forcing security services on a project or finding alternative ways to make money from the industry. This issue has affected some areas more than others: Scotland, Northern Ireland and the north west of England have been particularly hard hit. However, there is evidence to suggest that the problem is not confined to these areas and the survey responses imply that these crimes are somewhat underreported.

The impact of crime varies considerably. Some respondents indicate that they have been very lucky in encountering hardly any crime throughout their construction careers. However, there are some cases where crime has resulted in financial damages and loss of life. Thankfully, these most serious occurrences are rare but that does not mean that their importance should be underplayed.

By Laura Warne, Research Officer

Introduction

The Chartered Institute of Building (CIOB) is the leading professional body for managers in the global construction industry. Established in 1834, the CIOB continues to lead the way in establishing, promoting and maintaining standards of excellence in the sector.

The CIOB draws its members from a wide range of professional disciplines, from across the building and construction supply chains. These include clients, consultants and contractors, as well as specialists in regulation, research and education.

The purpose of this research is to investigate the scale and impact of crime in the construction industry. Through the perception of construction professionals, it examines which crimes are most prevalent and what effect they have on the industry. The research also examines the industry's response to crime and considers the effectiveness of crime prevention methods.

This research will attempt to identify which crimes have the biggest effect on the industry, in terms of cost and working environment, and how construction workers should address crime when it occurs.

Background information

The construction industry is very susceptible to crime. Factors such as the constant turnover of staff, the mobility of the workforce and the temporary nature of project work make the industry an easy target for both opportunistic petty criminals and serious organised crime.

Crime in the industry is varied and often reflects the location of the project. Comments throughout the survey indicate that construction sites tend to be more often targeted in cities and heavily populated areas, where an array of criminal acts occur – from theft to security racketeering.

The nature of the construction workforce is also a factor that needs to be considered when examining crime in the industry. There are many temporary workers onsite, contracted for specific elements on a project. These numbers are constantly changing from day to day and it is difficult to enforce a strict site-access policy. The survey indicates that conflicts often arise with subcontracted staff and that it is these temporary elements of the workforce who are frequently involved in theft on site and incidents of intimidation/assault. The results show that directly employed staff are less likely to commit criminal acts, which could reflect the perception that a higher level of corporate responsibility exists amongst this group.

The survey looks at a variety of crimes that have an impact on construction and identifies three areas that particularly affect the industry: theft, vandalism, and health and safety neglect.

Common crimes in construction

Theft and vandalism

It is estimated that the construction industry suffers a loss of more than £400 million a year due to vandalism and theft¹, although it is hard to get an accurate figure as many of these crimes go unreported.

The theft of plant poses a particular problem to the industry; the replacement of expensive equipment could lead to a project incurring substantial and unforeseen costs.

In the current economic climate, police forces have warned companies to protect their equipment and prevention methods have proved successful.

The recovery rate for plant that has been stolen has improved in recent years. This is thanks to initiatives developed by membership organisation Construction Industry Theft Solutions (CITS), plus continuing collaboration with the police on crime prevention and the recovery of stolen goods. CITS recommends that site-owners perform risk assessments and register all plant and equipment with the Construction Equipment Security and Registration scheme (CESAR)². This uses identification technology linked to a database to help track plant and equipment.

Taking such precautions will significantly reduce the risk of theft onsite and increase the chances of recovering any stolen equipment. This would ensure that companies waste no time and money on the selection and replacement of equipment, while also helping to minimise insurance premiums.

Health and safety neglect

In the survey, 90% of respondents indicate that they have witnessed health and safety neglect. Of those 90%, 20% say it occurs every week and 42% say it happens on a monthly basis. Health and safety compliance should be a top priority in the construction industry, which has been plagued by avoidable accidents occurring as a result of neglect.

There were 72 fatal injuries in the construction industry in the 2007/08 period, with similar statistics for each of the past five years³. Of course, this figure does not include the total number of accidents and illnesses caused by health and safety neglect in the same period. The industry needs to do more to comply with all health and safety regulations, to carry out risk assessments before work begins and to ensure accidents are prevented. This will help reduce the number of incidents and minimise the fines and possible prison sentences.

Organised crime and construction

Instances of organised crime in the industry appear to be rare, if not entirely unknown. Criminal organisations have acted as security guard companies, waste disposal organisations and gang masters providing forced, cheap labour. Paying for services offered by these organisations feeds into serious crime - you should always alert the police if you think such a criminal group has approached your site.

Rogue security

This research looks at rogue security companies and the effect they have on the construction industry.

Security in the industry is a prime target for organised criminals. In recent years, there have been a number of instances – particularly in Glasgow, Northern Ireland and Merseyside. Typically, these organisations force their services on to construction sites, which have little choice but to accept the security on offer. Damage to the site and threats of violence against staff have occurred when site managers tried to refuse these security services.

In an attempt to prevent rogue security guard companies from operating, there has been a crackdown by the police and Security Industry Association. Anyone not registered with the SIA faces possible imprisonment and a £5000 fine, to avoid such measure the SIA blue badges must be worn by all security. In the Merseyside area, Operation SEAHOG ran checks on security guards on site to send a clear message to the industry and security companies that guards must be registered with the SIA.

1 D. Edwards, *Plant and equipment theft: a practical guide*, 2007.

2 Construction Industry Theft Solutions, *Code of Practice*.

3 Health and Safety Executive, *Fatal Injury Statistics, 2007/2008*.

Methodology

The survey was conducted using a web-based questionnaire, which respondents could access through the CIOB website (www.ciob.org.uk).

Respondents were asked general demographic questions regarding their age, gender, job level, sector, and the number of employees in their organisation.

An email was sent to 26,901 CIOB members, informing them that the survey was online. The survey was also available to the wider industry through the CIOB website.

There were both quantitative and qualitative questions in the survey, to allow respondents the opportunity to openly express their opinions.

The sample

The sample consisted of 1100 construction industry professionals, the majority (65%) of whom described themselves as management.

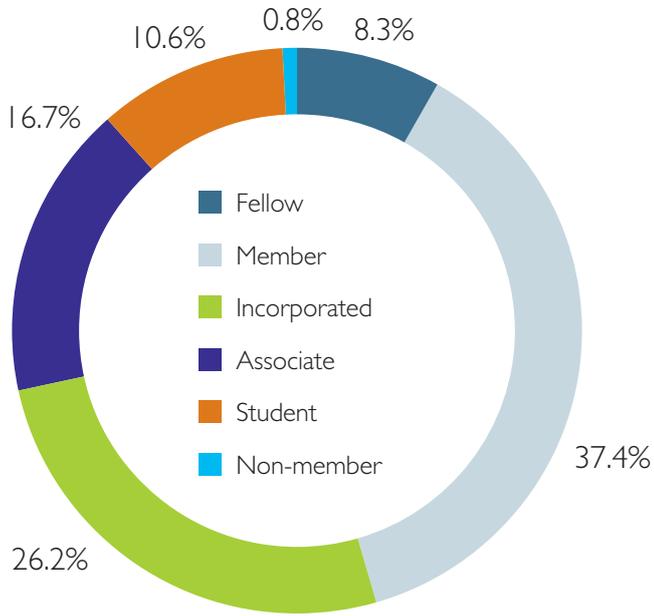
94% of respondents were male; 6% were female.

84% of respondents were located in the UK and 16% in the rest of the world.

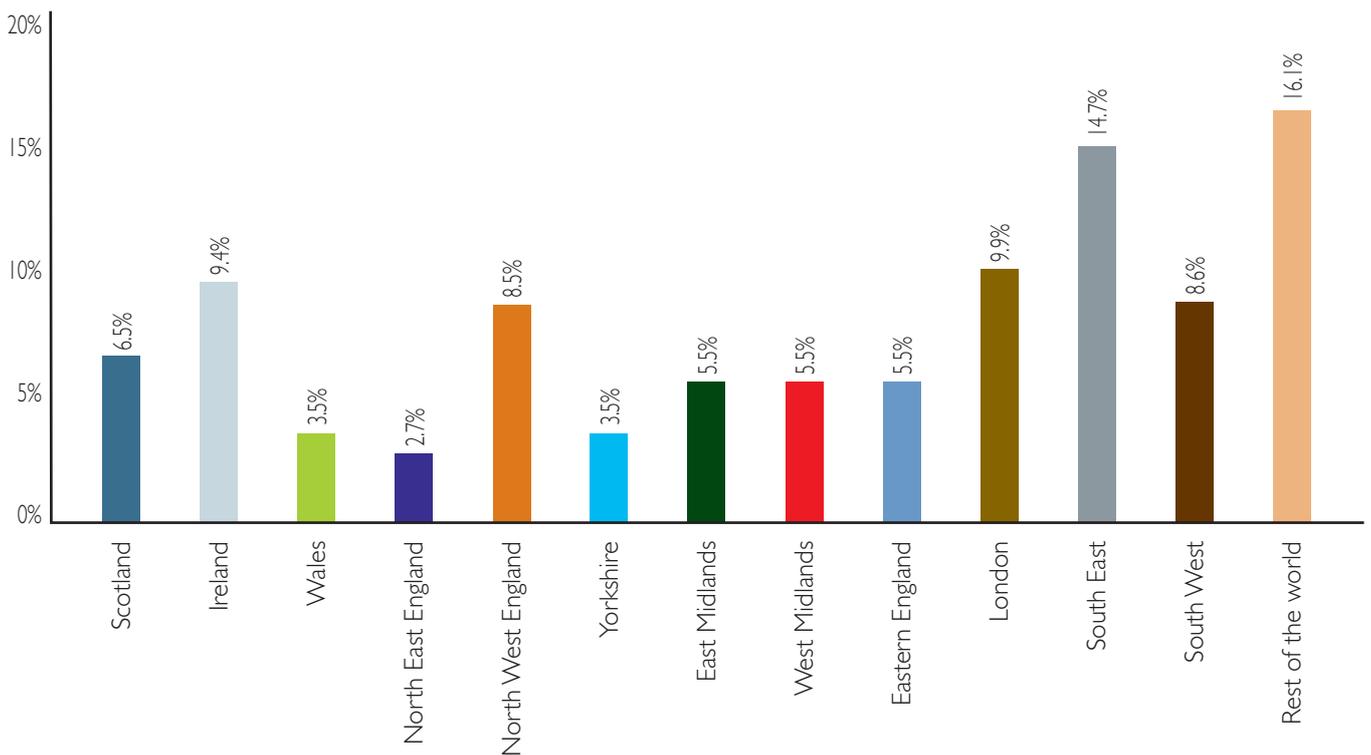
38% of respondents work for an organisation that employs more than 500 people.

Results

1. Membership level

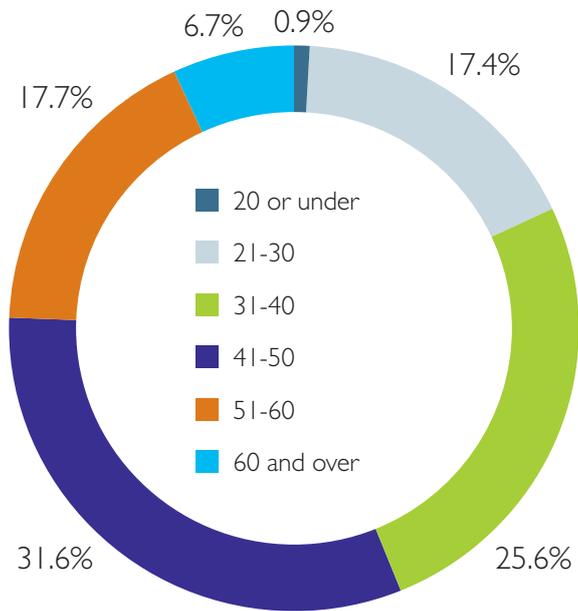


2. Location

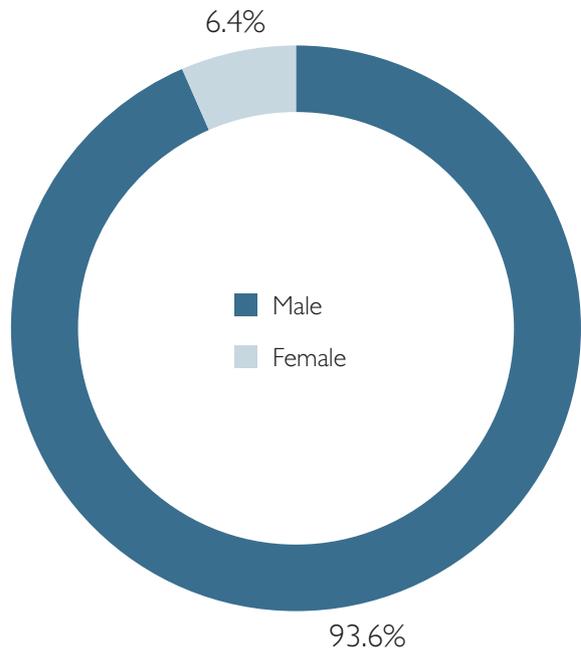


There were respondents from all over the world; one fifth of respondents were located in Hong Kong.

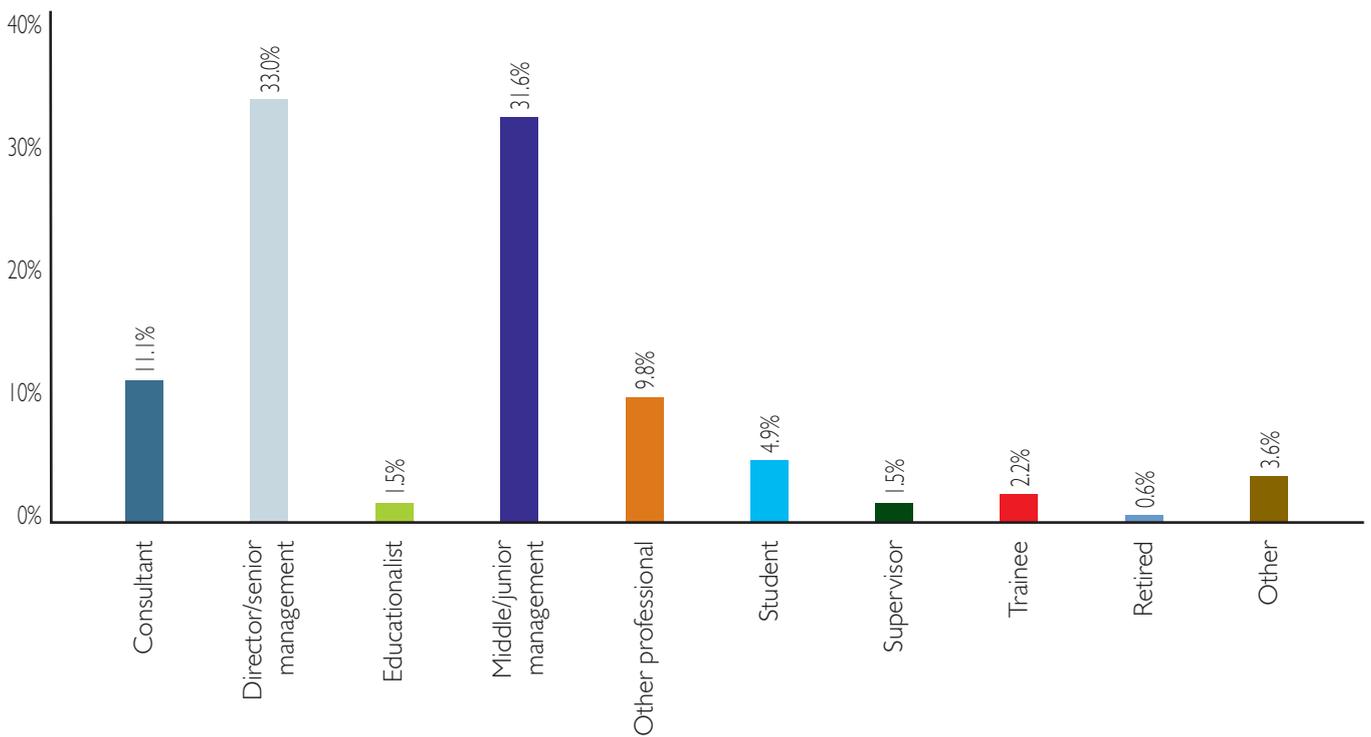
3. Age



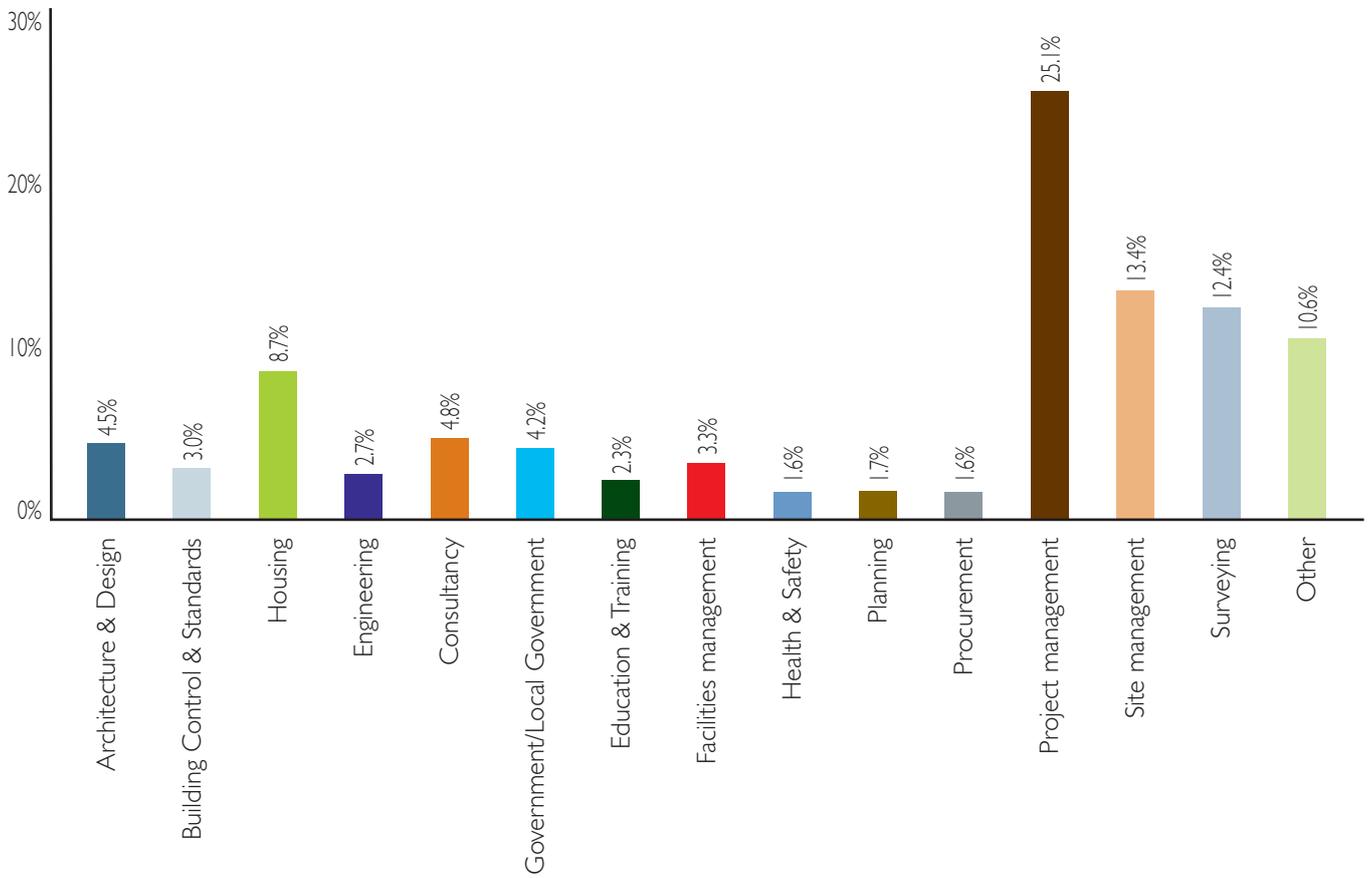
4. Gender



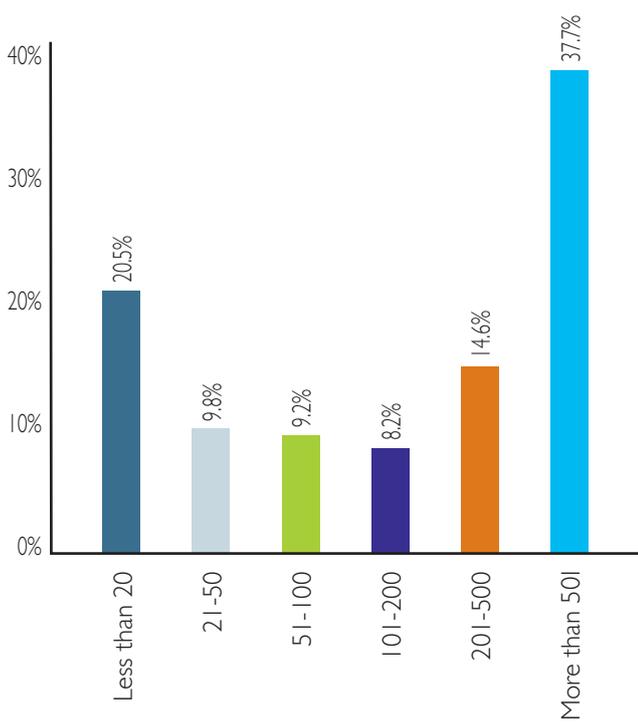
5. Job level



6. Job Sector

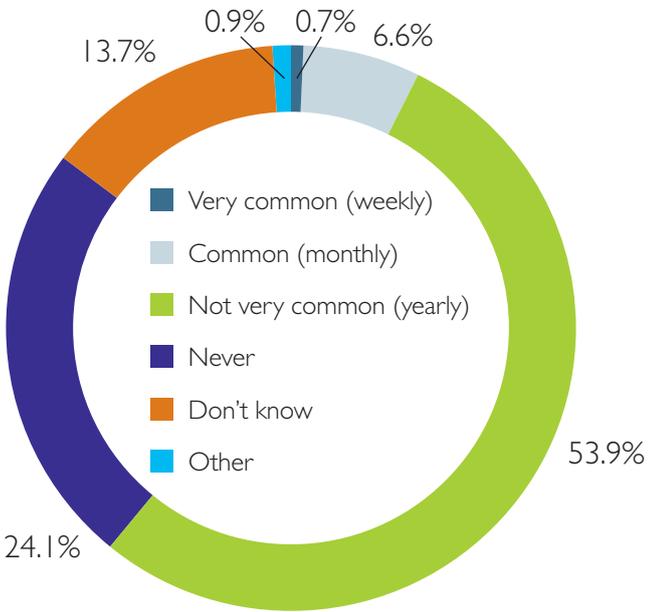


7. How many people are employed in your organisation?

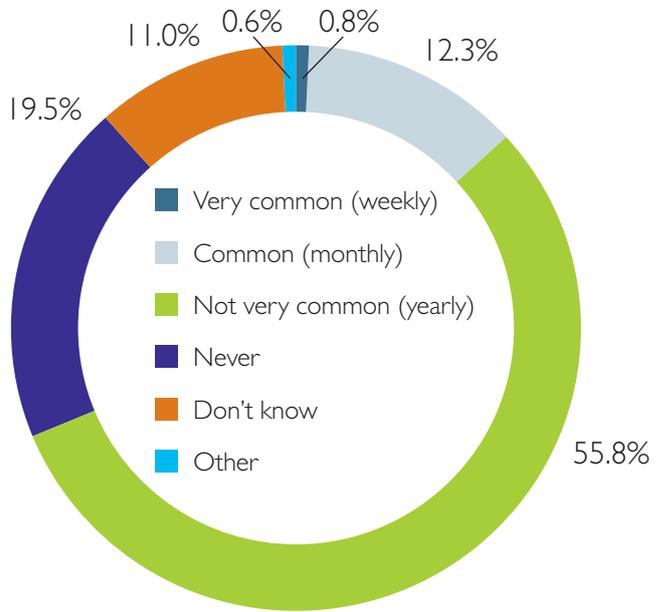


8. In your experience, how common are the following crimes in your business or a project you have worked on?

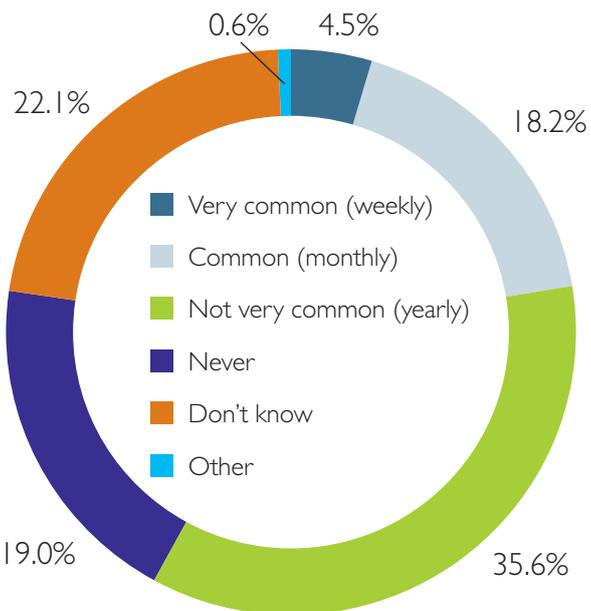
8.1 Arson



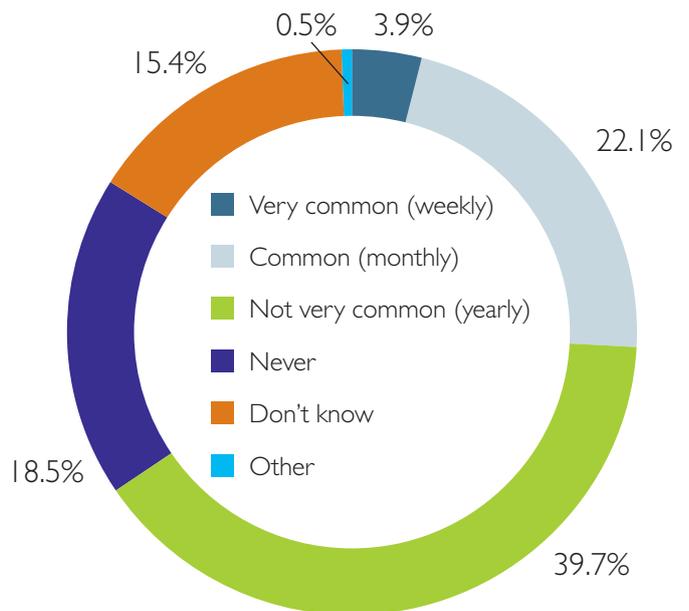
8.2 Assault



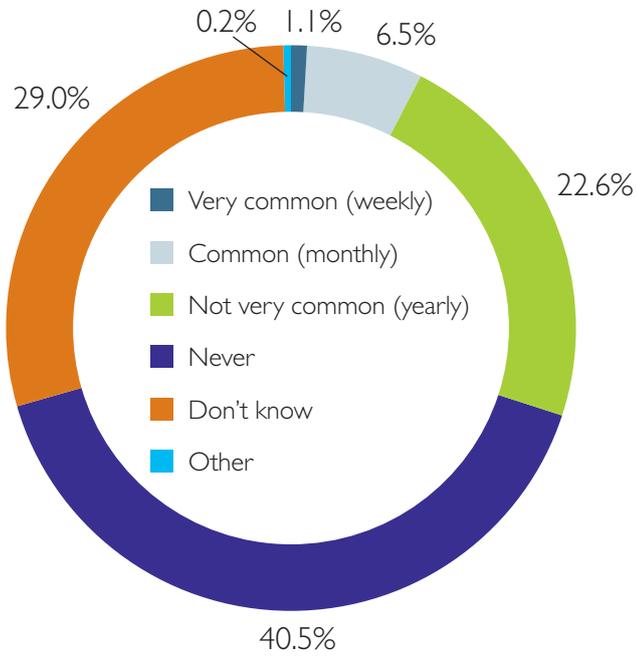
8.3 Bribery



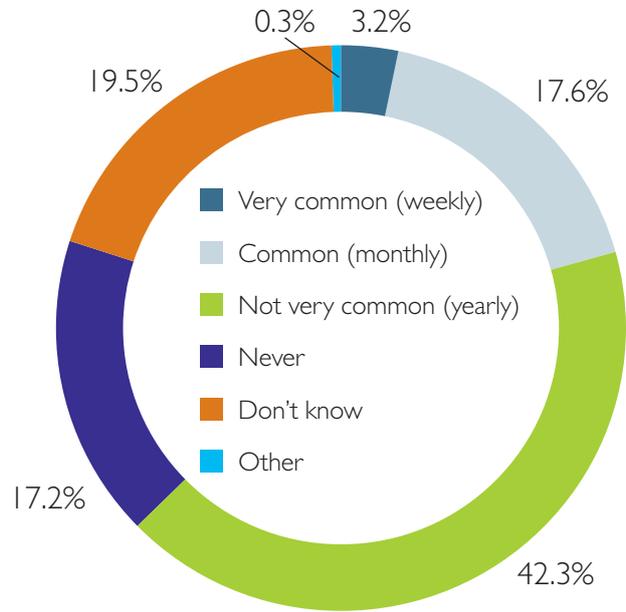
8.4 Data loss/theft



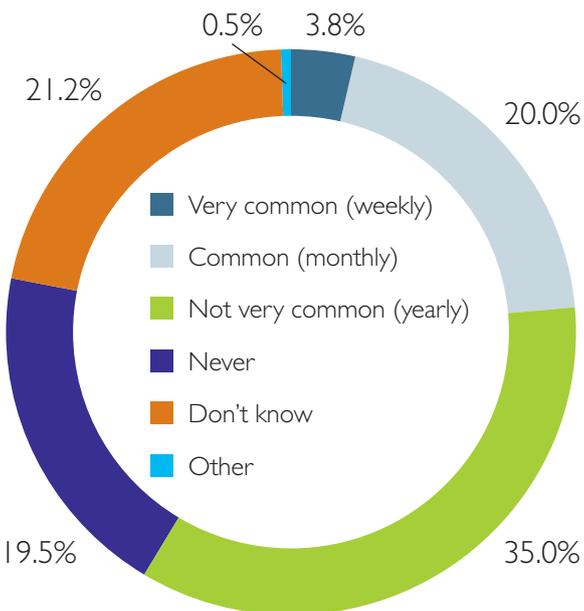
8.5 Forced labour



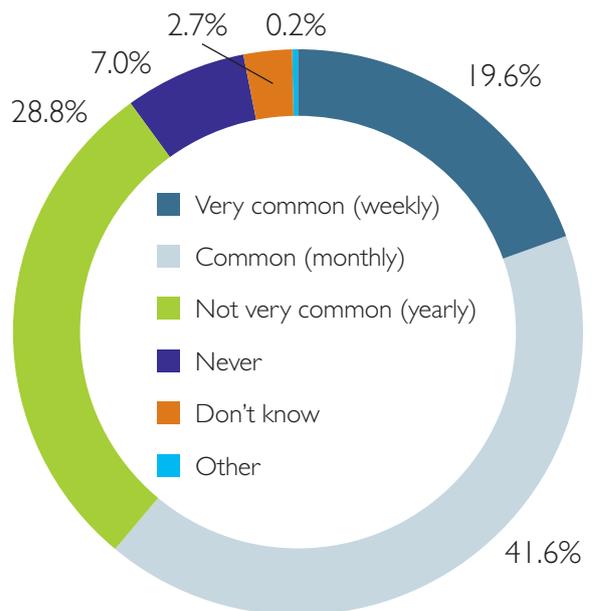
8.6 Fraud



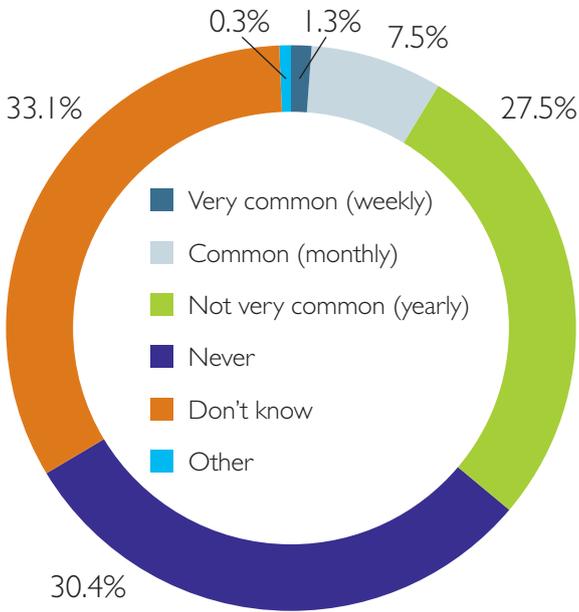
8.7 Handling stolen goods



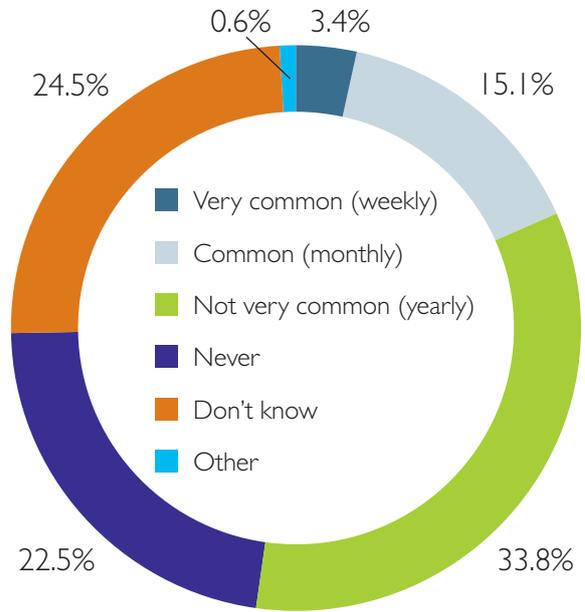
8.8 Health and safety neglect



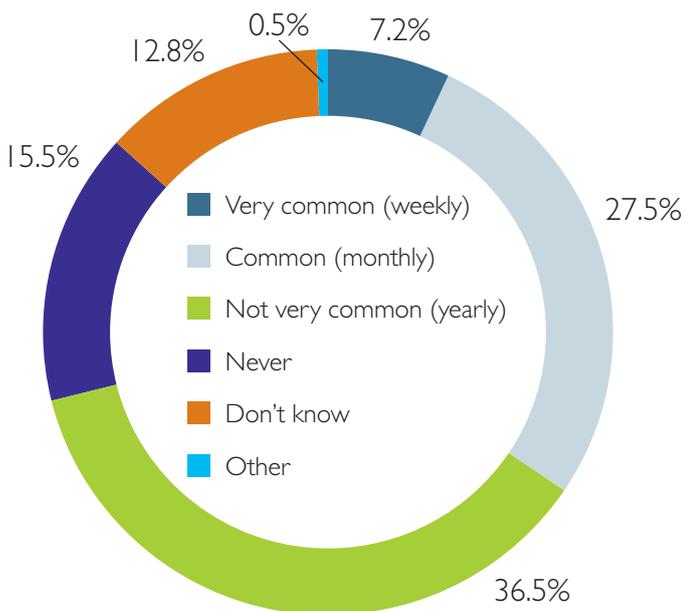
8.9 Identity theft



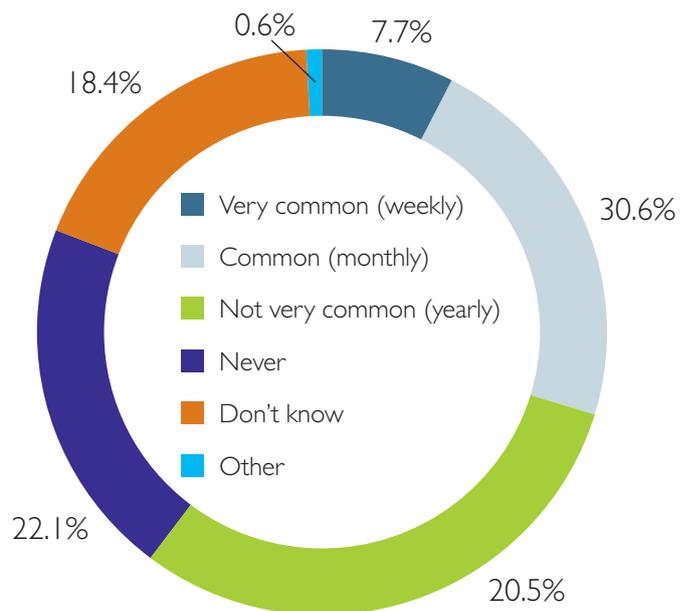
8.10 Illegal drug dealing or use



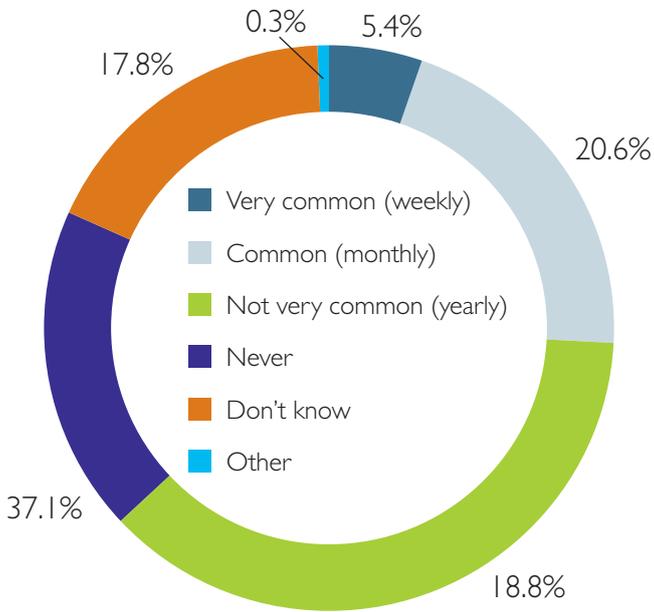
8.11 Illegal waste disposal



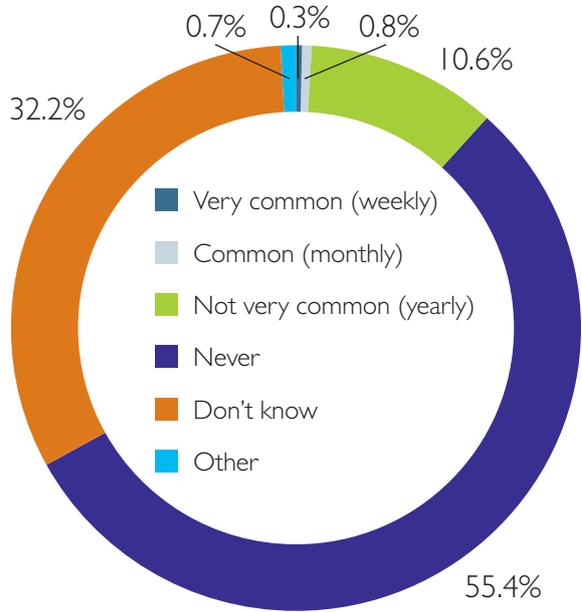
8.12 Illegal working



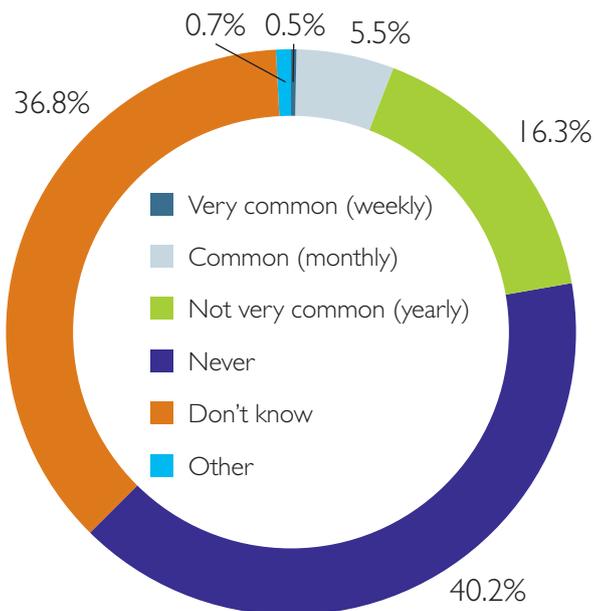
8.13 Intimidation



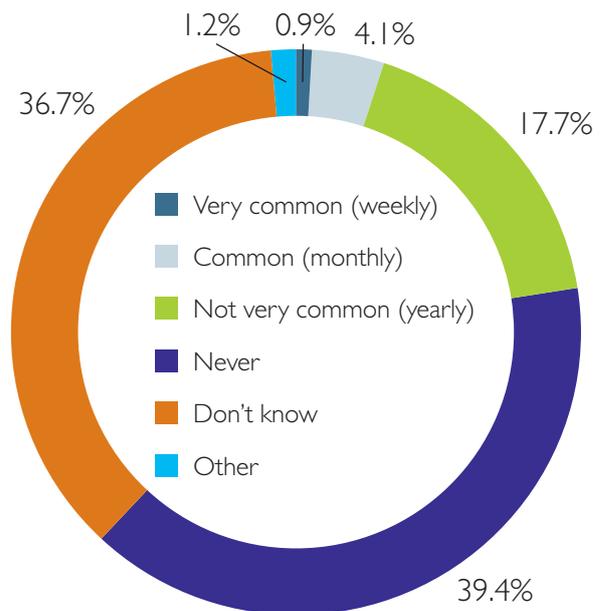
8.14 Kidnap/extortion



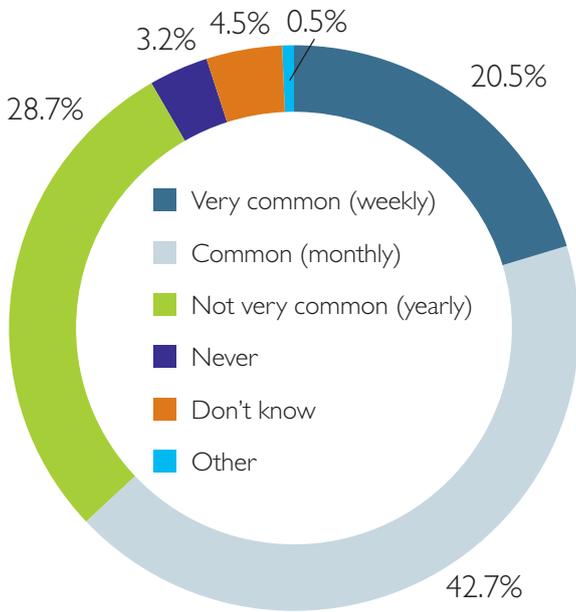
8.15 Money laundering



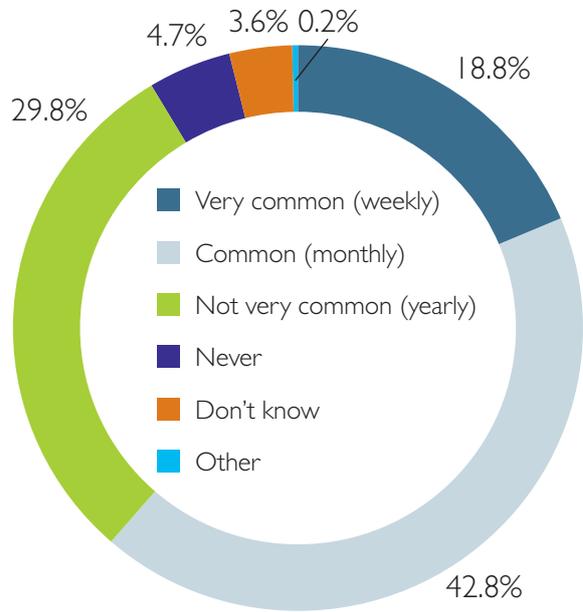
8.16 Racketeering



8.17 Theft

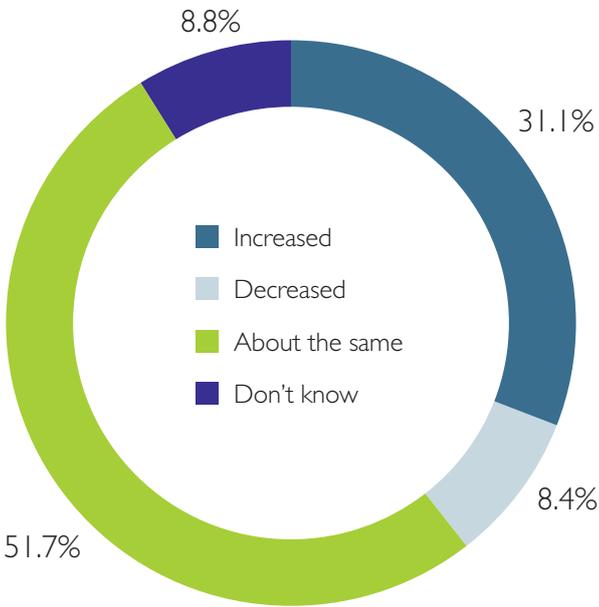


8.18 Vandalism



When comparing these results, it was shown that the majority of respondents have experienced theft (92%), vandalism (91%) and health and safety neglect (90%). Far fewer, although still a significant number, have experienced kidnap (11%) and money laundering or racketeering (22%).

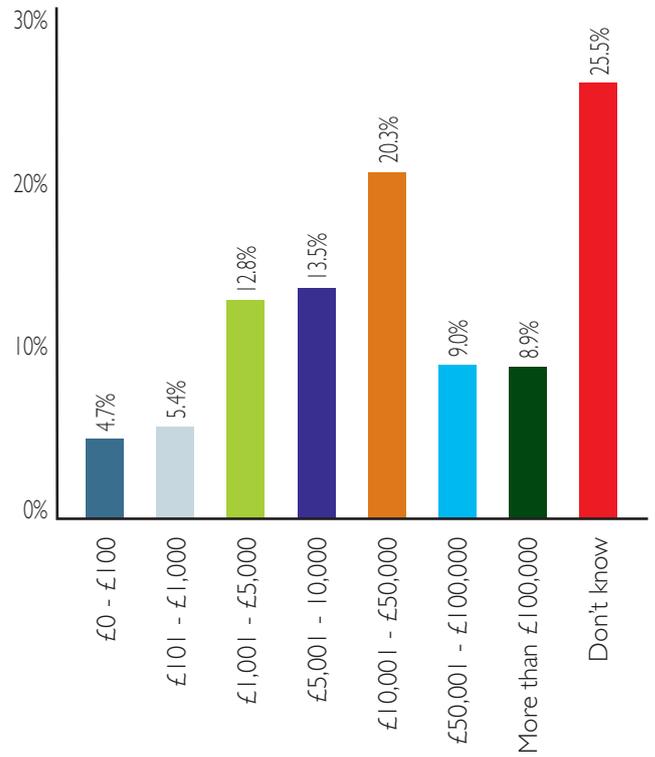
9. In general, what do you think has happened to the amount of crime in the construction industry in the last 12 months?



On further analysis:

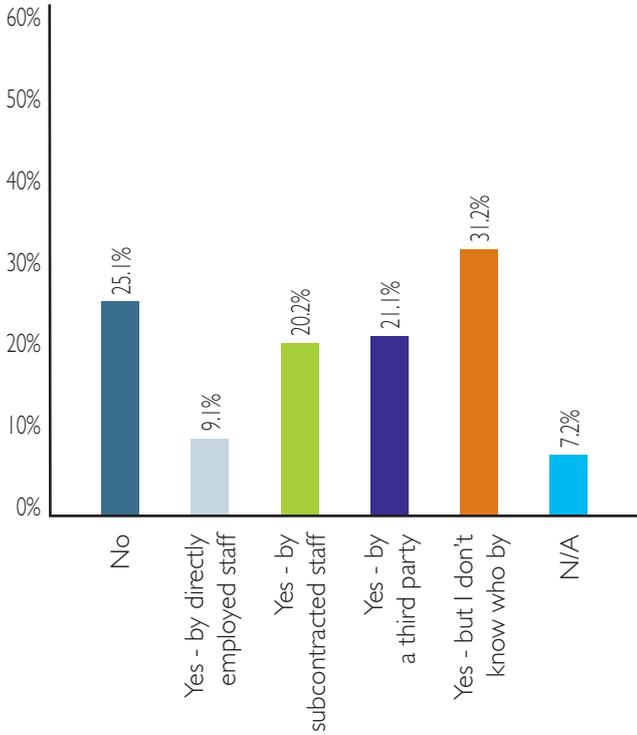
Of the respondents who think crime is increasing in the industry, comments show that the majority feel this is because of the economic climate, with more people needing to turn to illegitimate means to afford to live.

10. How much would you estimate in total that crime costs your company/site each year?

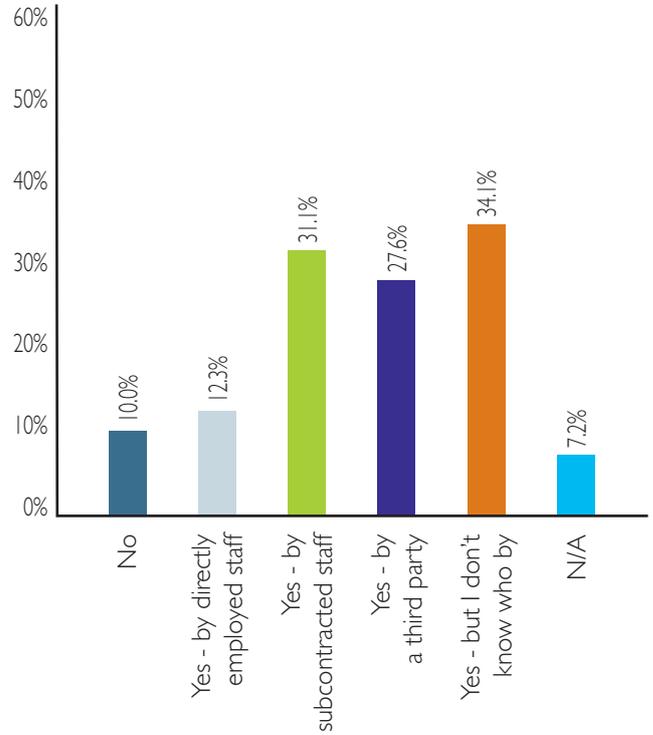


11. Have any of the following items been stolen from a site you have worked on and who do you think committed the crime?

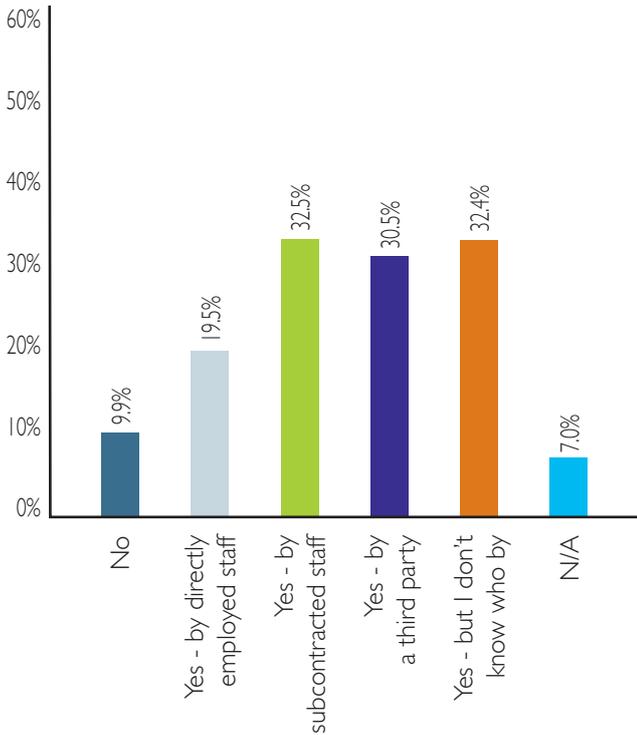
11.1 Personal property



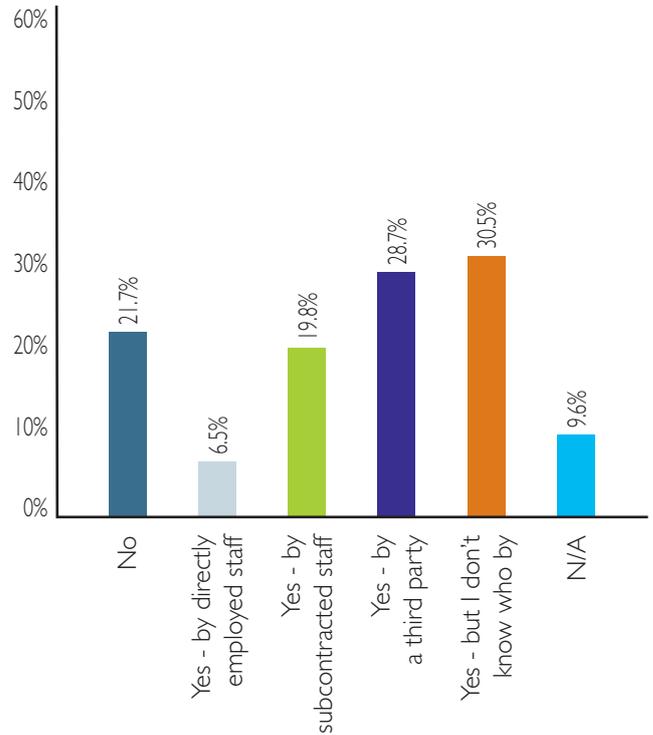
11.2 Tools



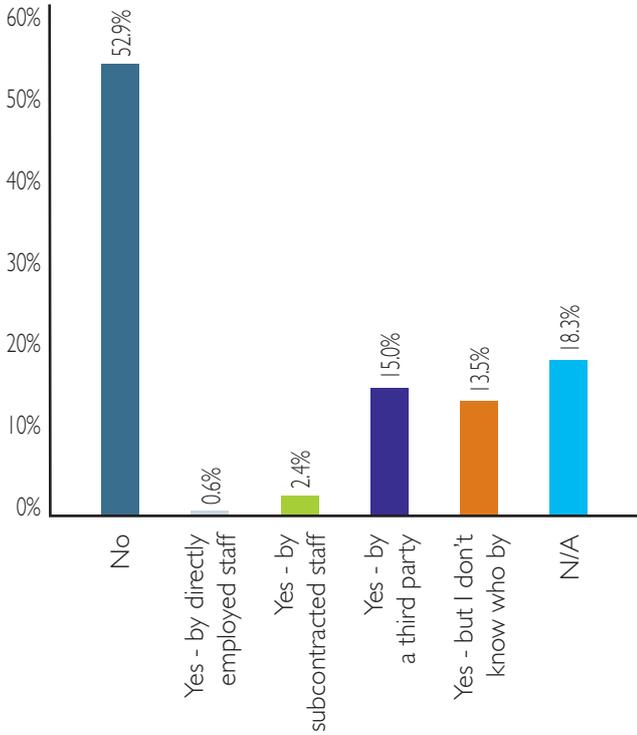
11.3 Building materials



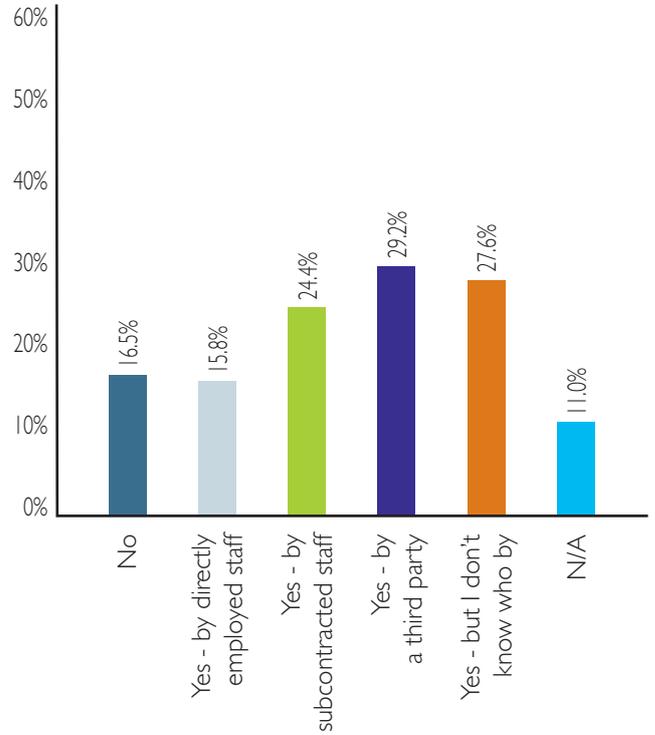
11.4 Small plant



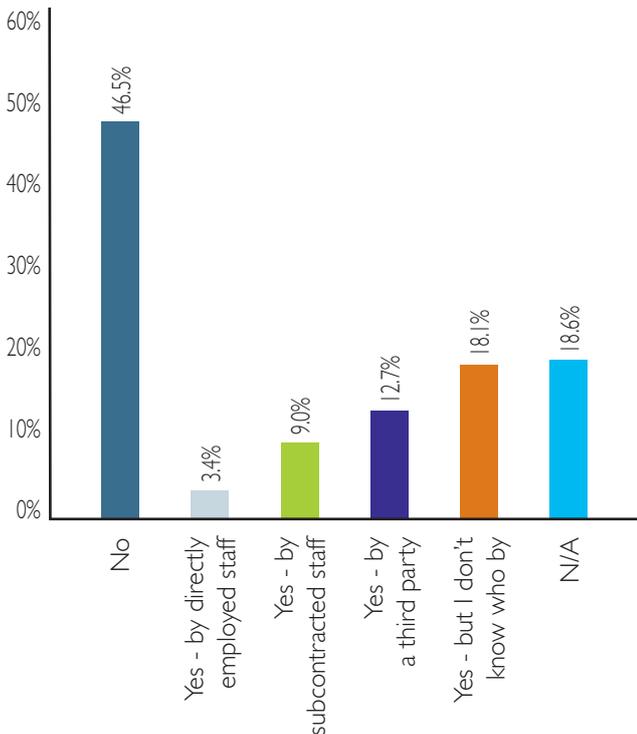
11.5 Heavy plant



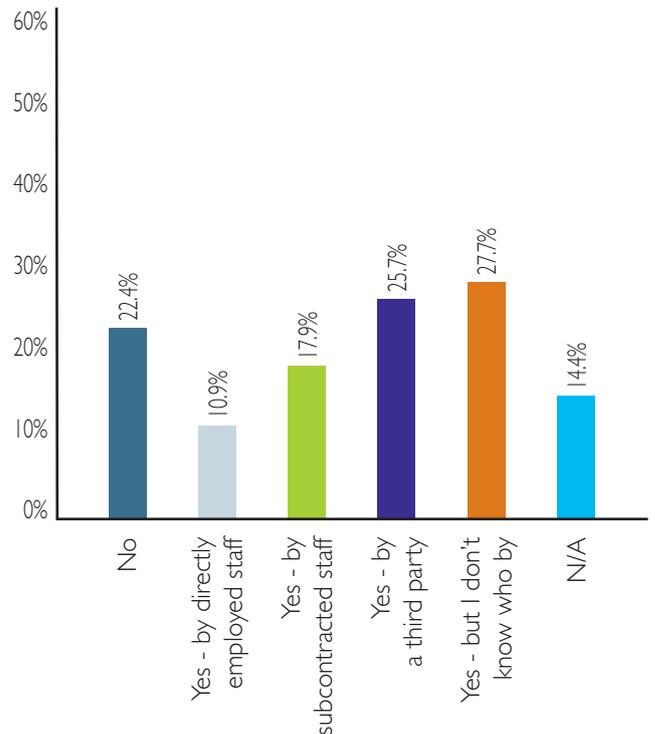
11.6 Scrap materials



11.7 Handling equipment



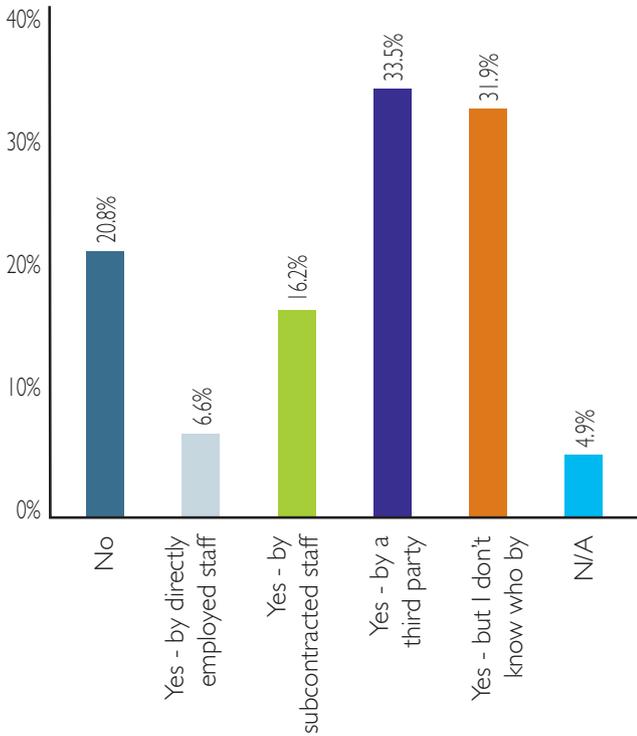
11.8 Existing fixtures and fittings i.e. old fireplaces, lead piping, etc



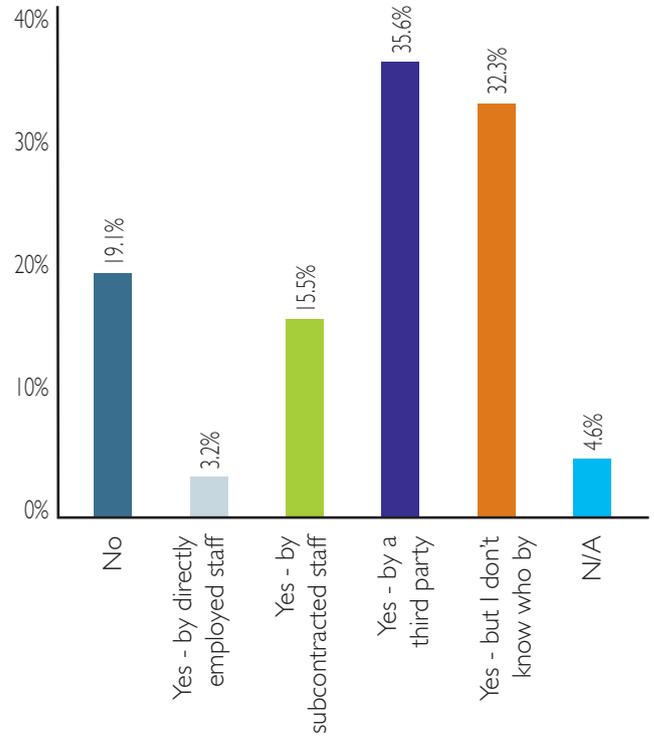
Comparing the results regarding who committed theft, it was found that directly employed staff were not involved in the majority of cases. Building materials were the most common items stolen, closely followed by tools; only 10% say they have not experienced these items being stolen.

12. Have any of the following forms of vandalism been committed on a project you have worked on and who do you think committed the crime?

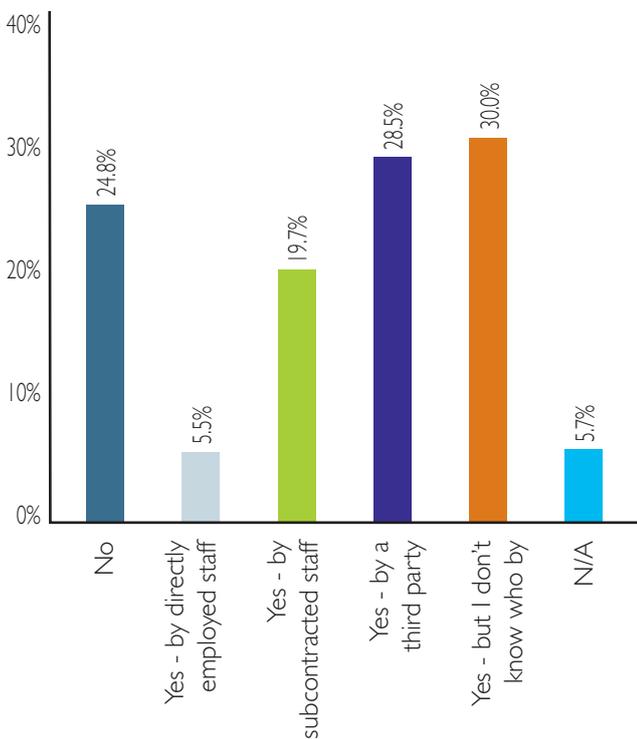
12.1 Graffiti



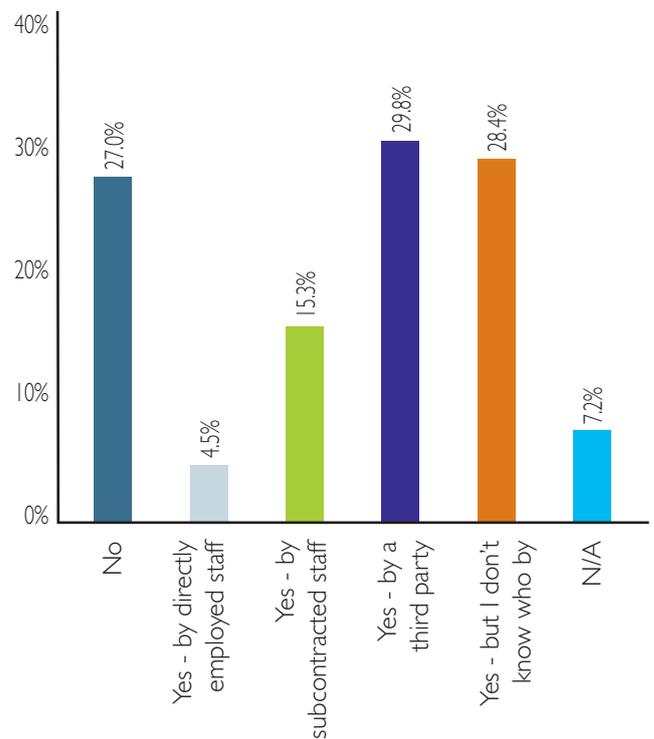
12.2 Damage to site



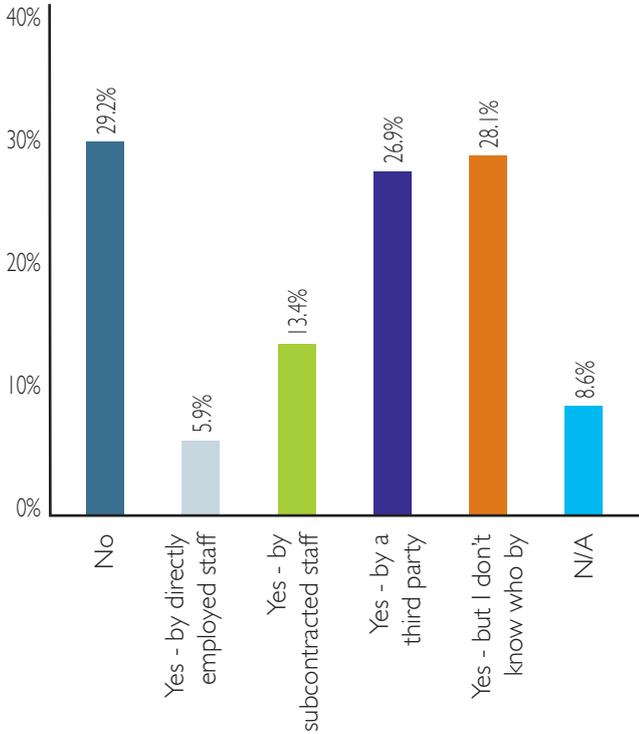
12.3 Damage to materials



12.4 Damage to construction/building

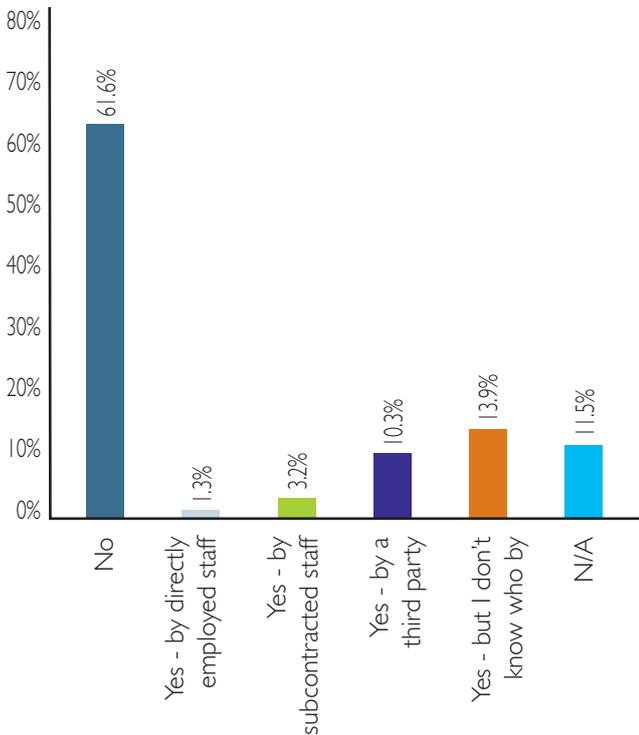


12.5 Damage to equipment/plant

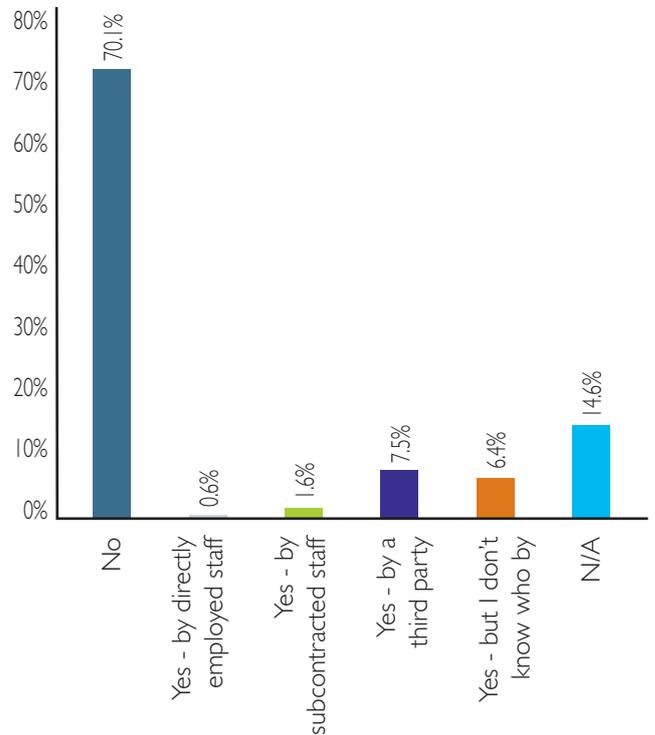


13. Have the following acts of arson been committed on a project you have worked on and who do you think committed the crime?

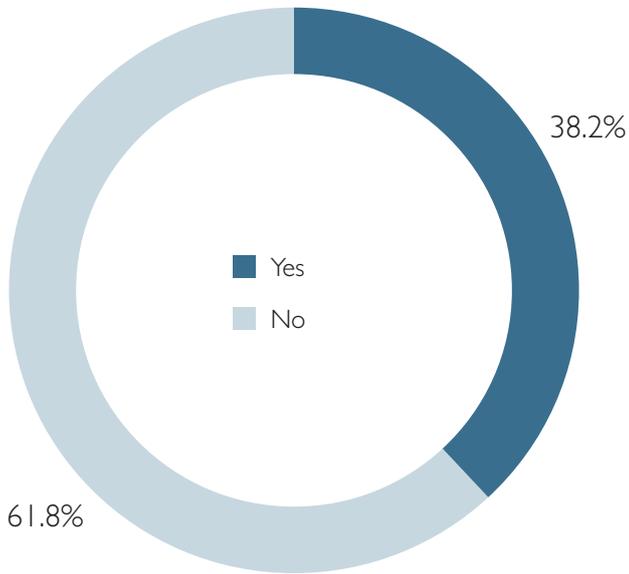
13.1 Minor fires with low impact



13.2 Major fires deliberately started to damage the site

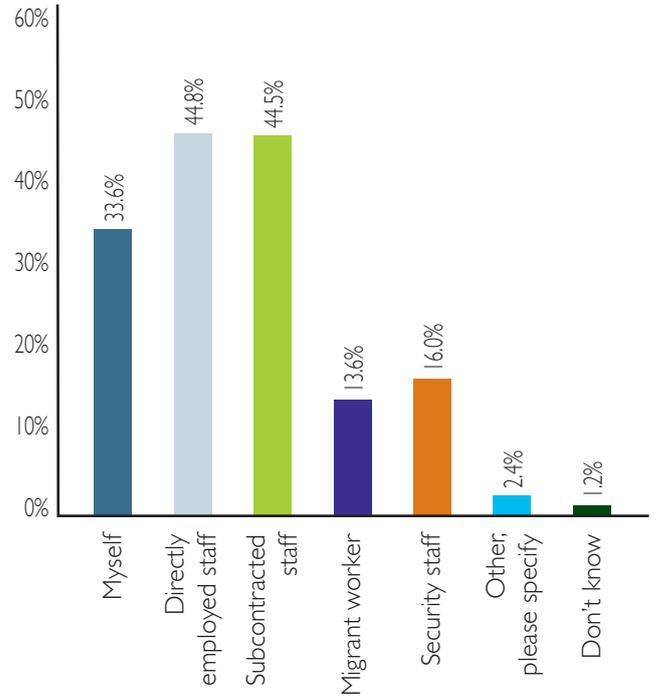


14. Have you witnessed or experienced any form of intimidation or assault occurring on a project you have worked on?

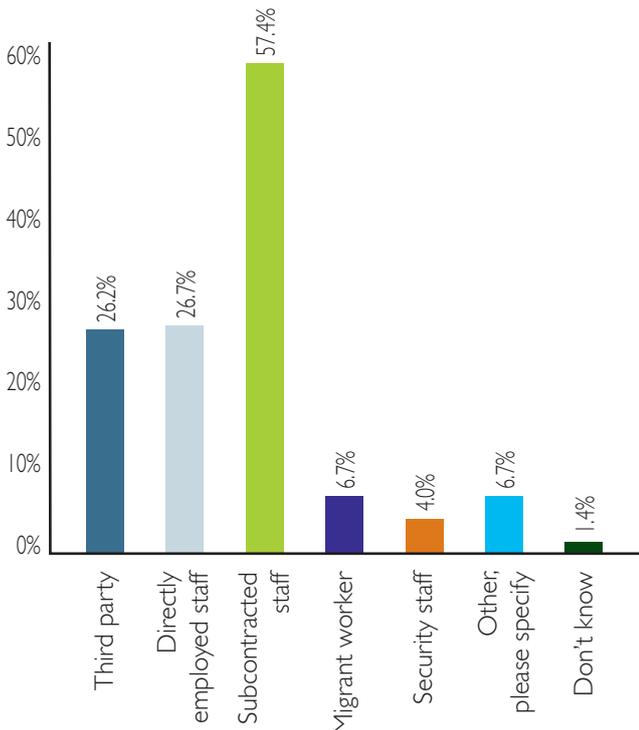


Respondents witnessing intimidation or assault indicate that it is usually a result of an onsite disagreement. In some cases, it involved managers asserting their power over staff.

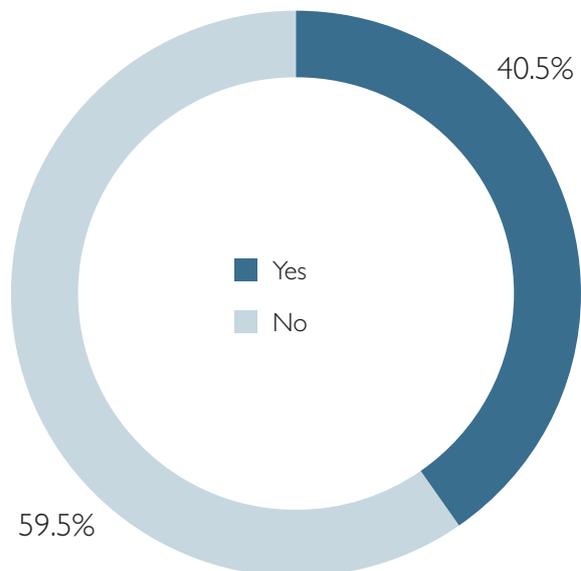
14.1 Who was the victim of the intimidation or assault that you witnessed?



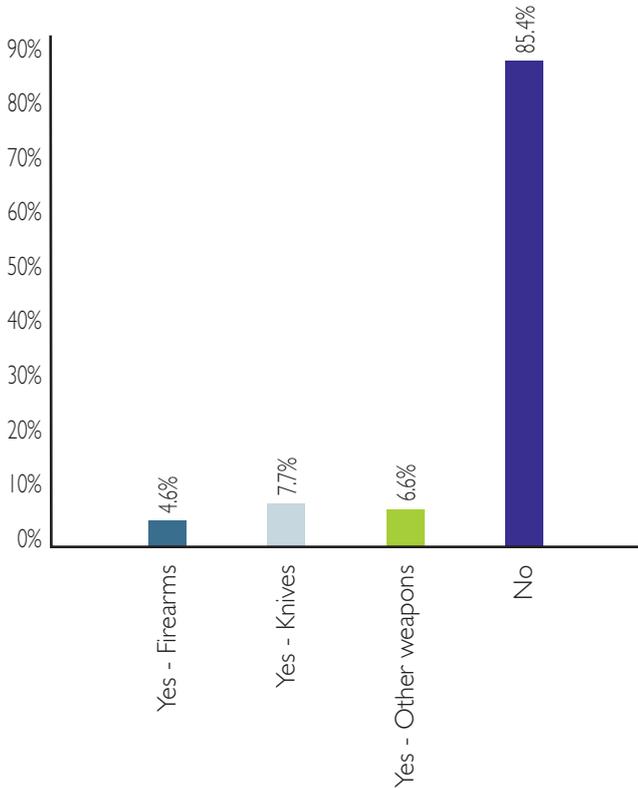
14.2 Who committed the act of intimidation or assault that you witnessed?



14.3 Did the last act of intimidation or assault you witnessed occur in the last twelve months?



15. Are you aware of any incidents involving firearms, knives or other weapons occurring on a project you have worked on?

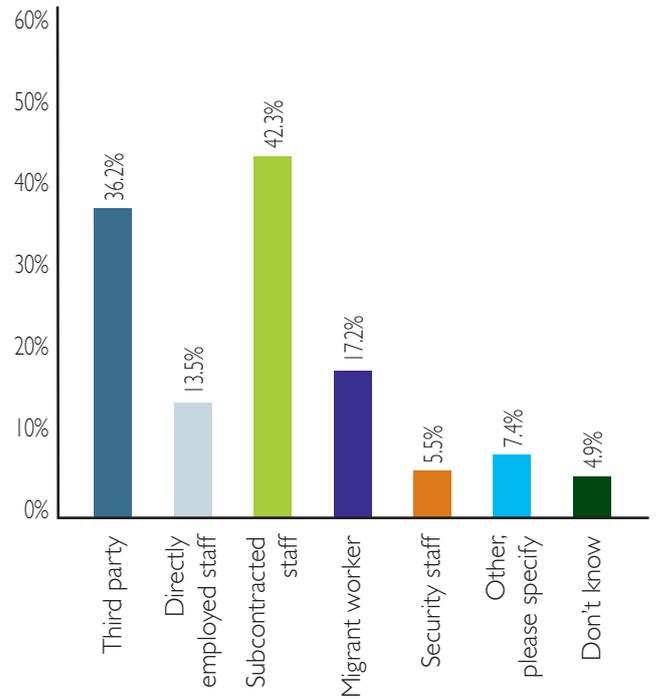


On further analysis:

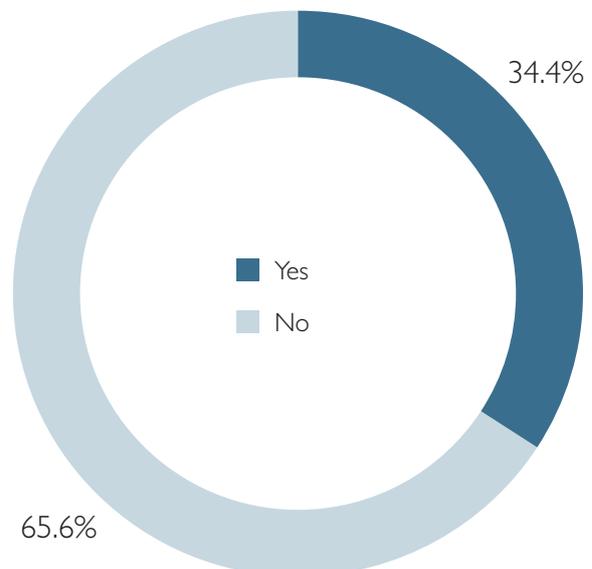
43% of the incidents involving firearms occur abroad, although London, the south east and north west of England each accounts for an additional 10% of firearm incidents. The remaining 27% incidents occurred in various parts of the UK.

In the UK, London and the south east of England had the highest percentage of respondents experiencing knife crime in the industry (13% in each region).

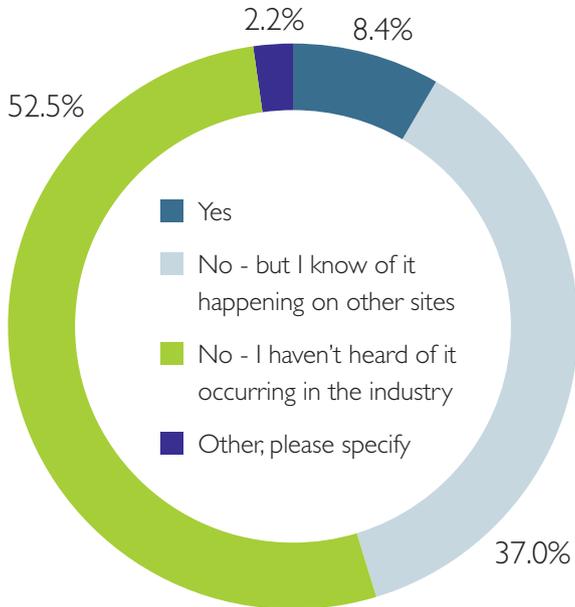
15.1 Who had possession of the firearm, knife or other weapon?



15.2 Have any of the incidents you witnessed involving these weapons occurred in the last 12 months?



16. Have you encountered a situation where services (i.e. security) have been forced upon you by organised crime?

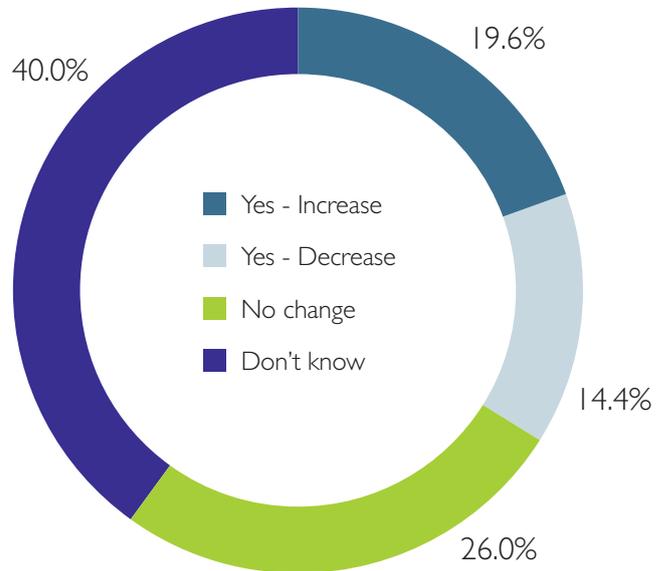


On further analysis:

25% of respondents encountering rogue security are located in Scotland, 19% located internationally and 16% in Ireland.

Of those who have experienced it first-hand or know of a protection racket elsewhere, 25% state it has been operating in the past 12 months. 14% of these respondents are located in the south east of England, 14% in Scotland and 12% in north west England.

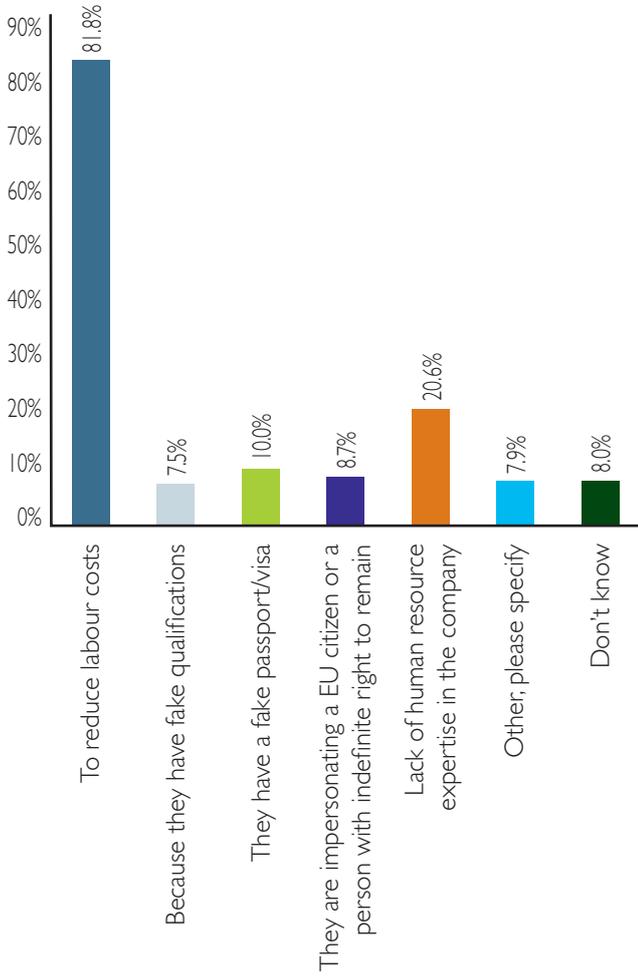
17. Have you noticed a change in the number of illegal immigrants working on construction sites in the last 12 months?



On further analysis:

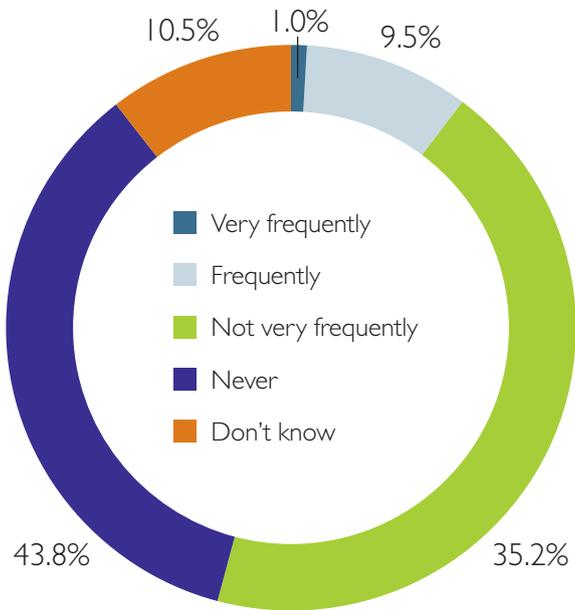
19% of respondents who have noticed an increase are located in the south east of England and 12% are located in London.

18. In general, why do you think illegal immigrants are employed on construction projects?

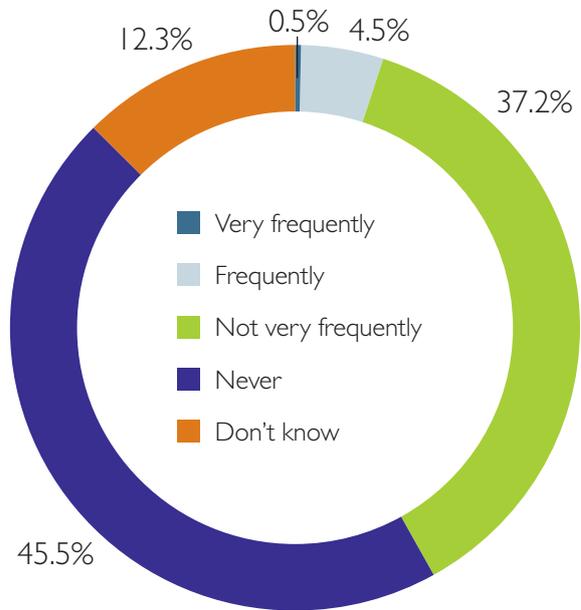


19. How frequently have you experienced the following types of crime in your business or projects?

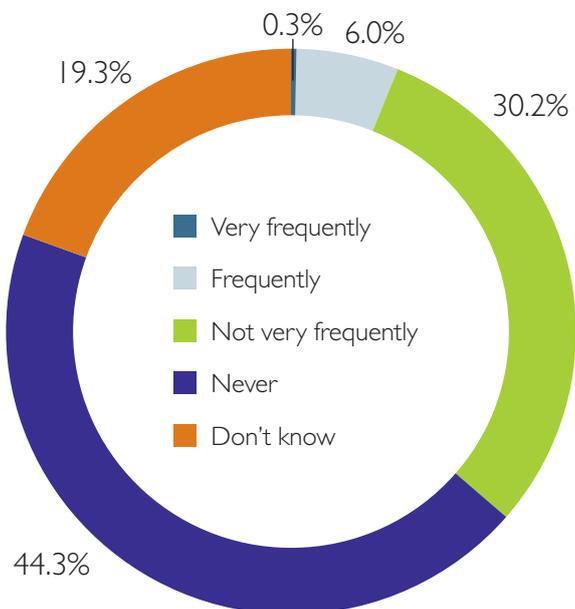
**19.1 Theft/interference of I.T systems
i.e. computers, client databases etc.**



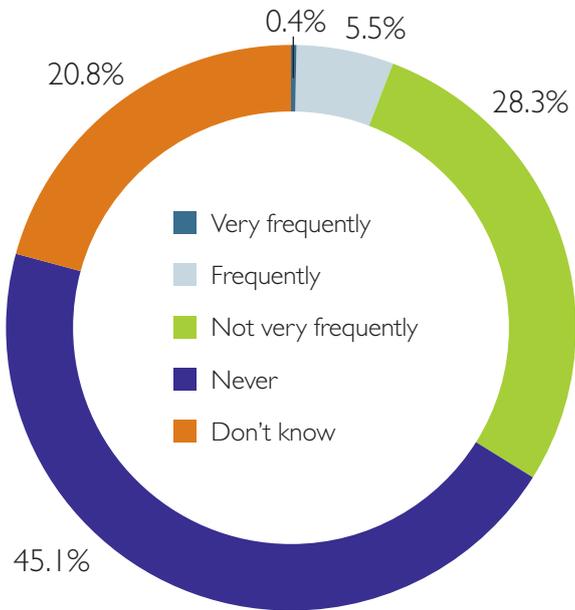
**19.2 Theft/interference with security systems
i.e. alarms/CCTV**



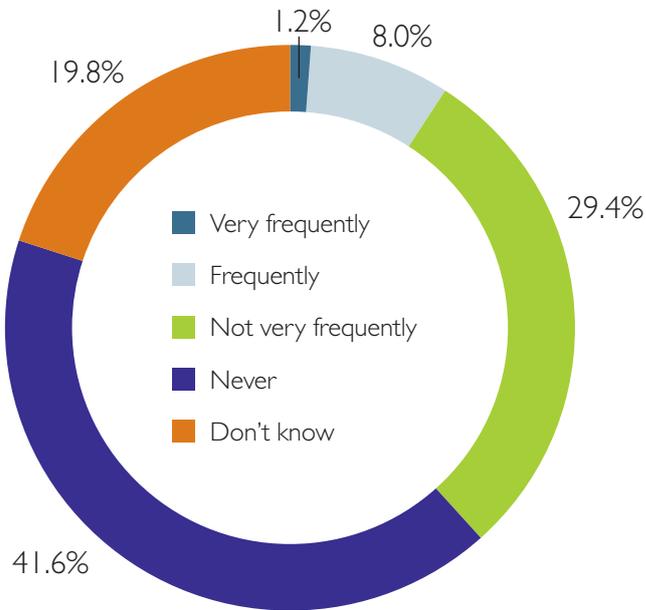
19.3 Fraud against insurers



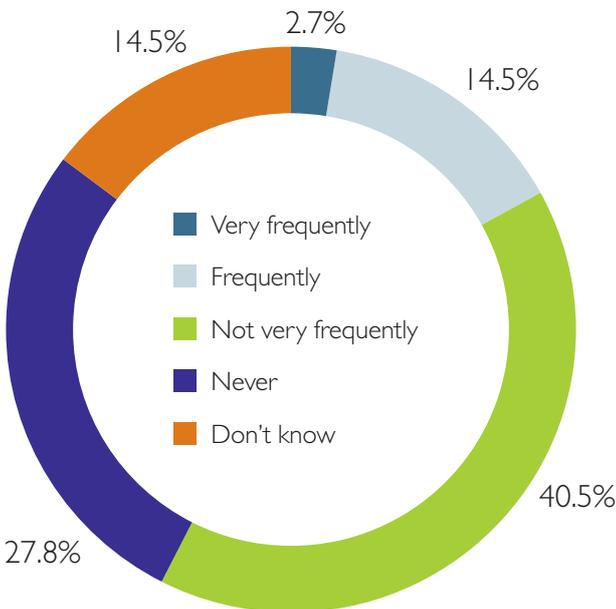
19.4 Fraud against suppliers



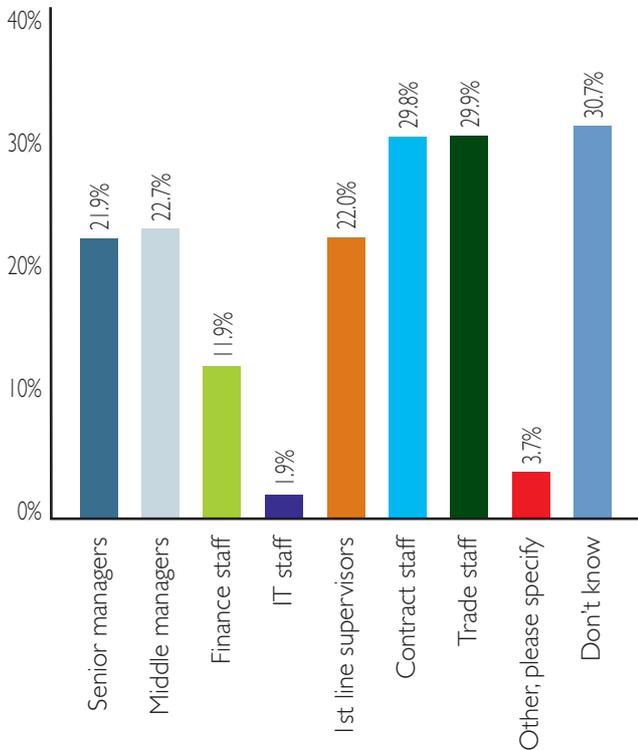
19.5 Fraud against clients/customers



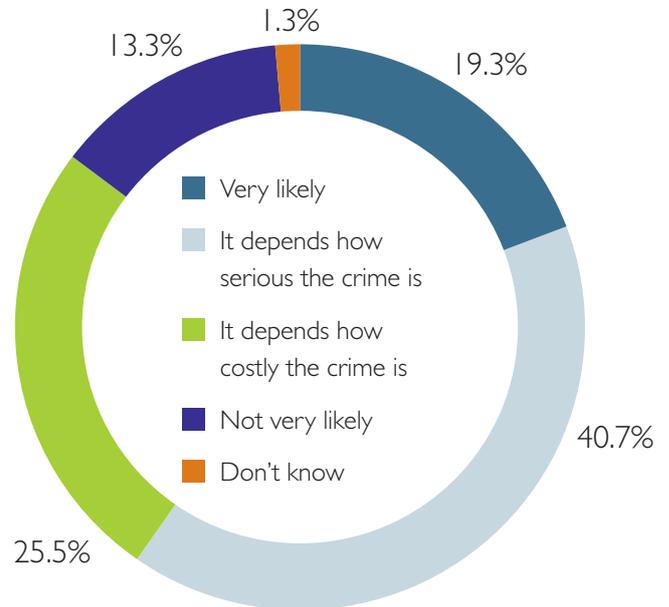
19.6 Illegal waste disposal/pollution



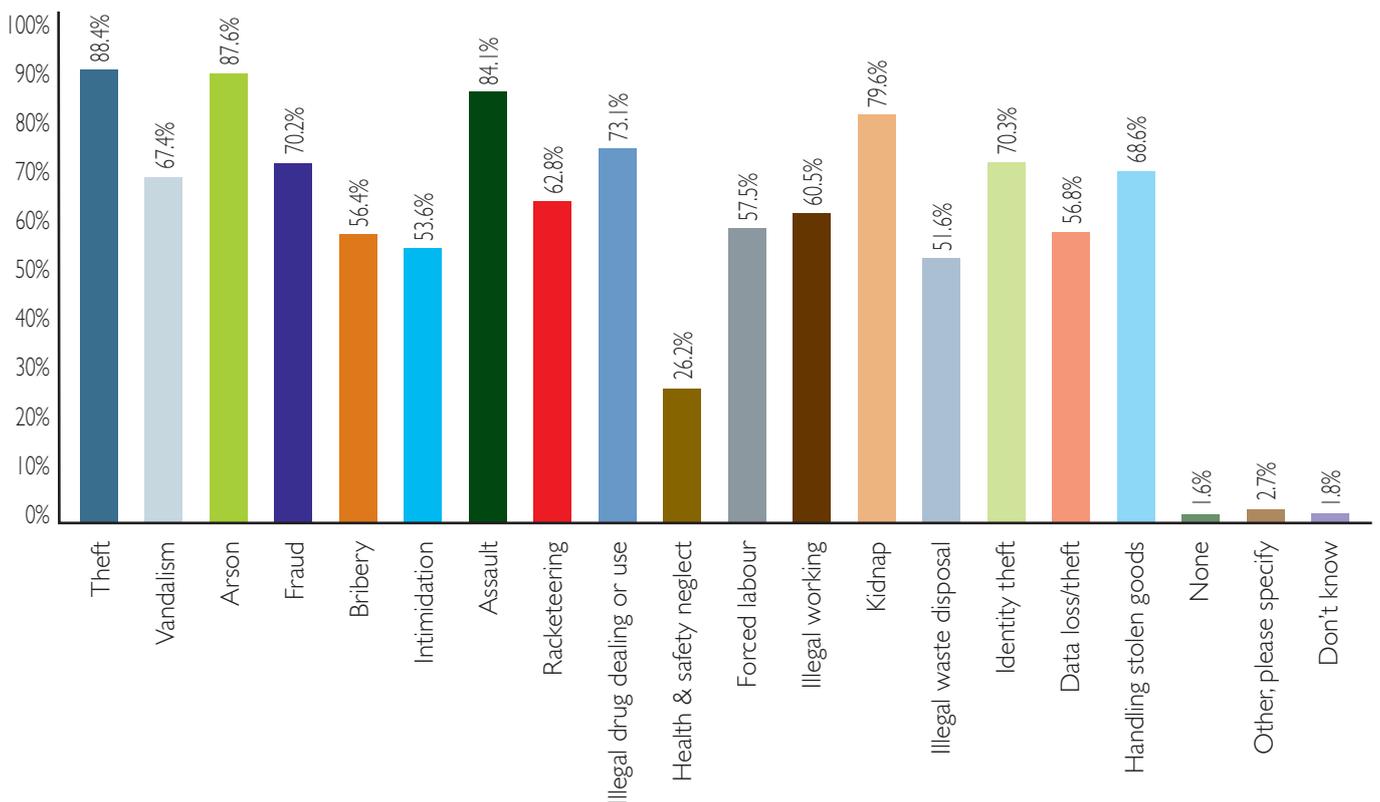
20. At what level do you think fraud most frequently occurs?



21. How likely do you think it would be for crime to be reported to the police in the construction industry?

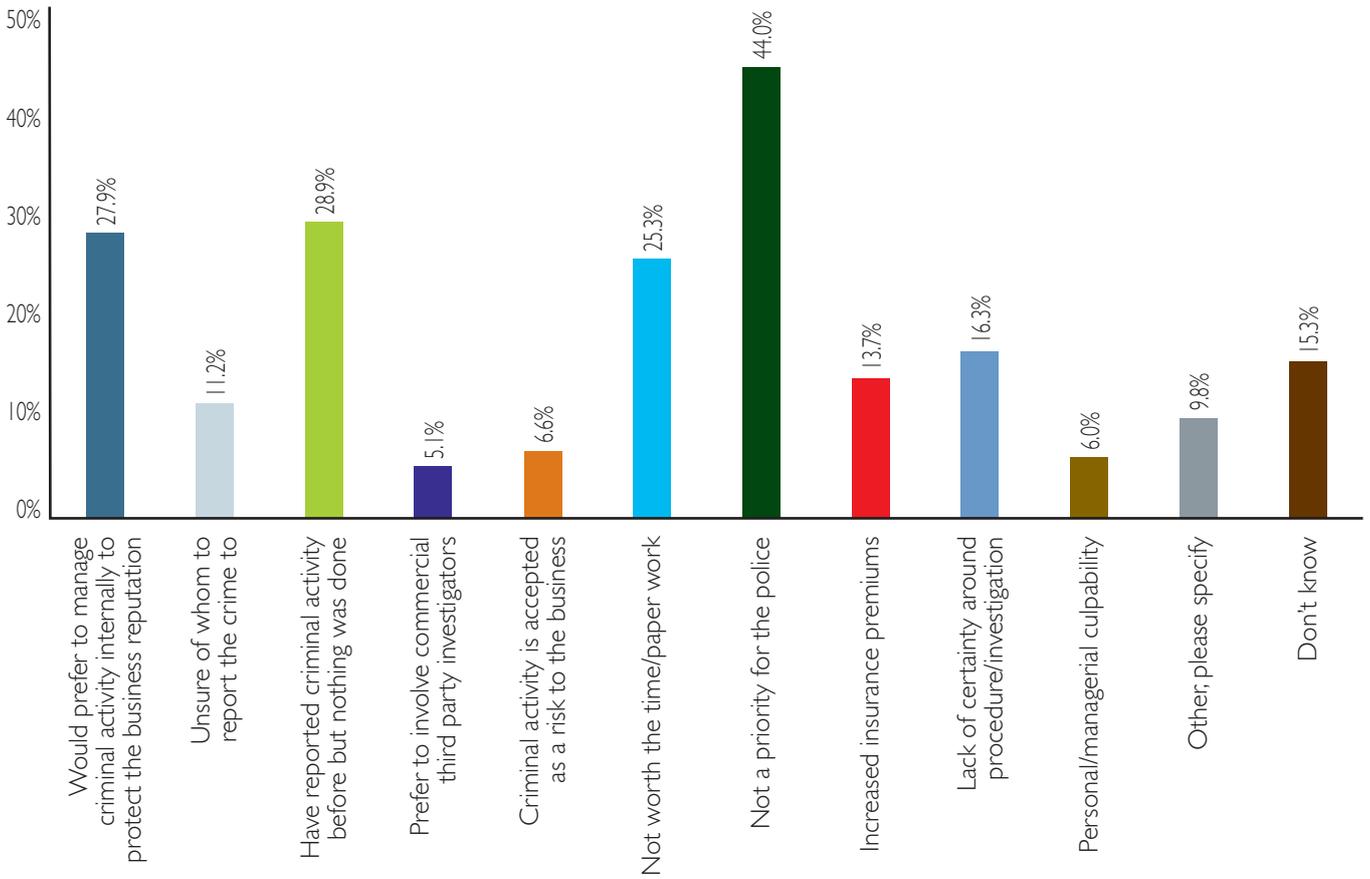


22. What kinds of criminal activity would you report to the police?

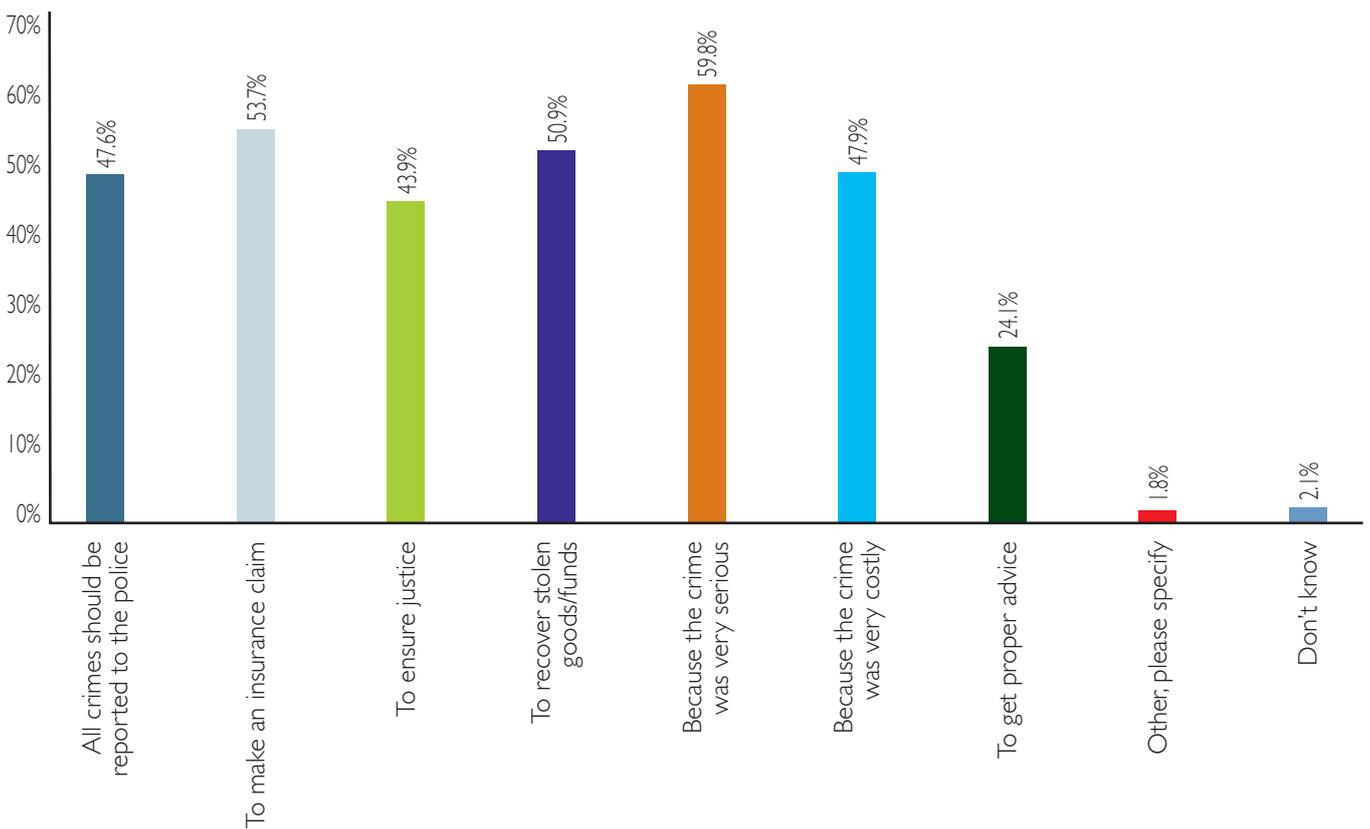


Respondents indicate they would be more likely to report health and safety neglect to the Health and Safety Executive than to the police.

23. Why would you not report a crime to the police?

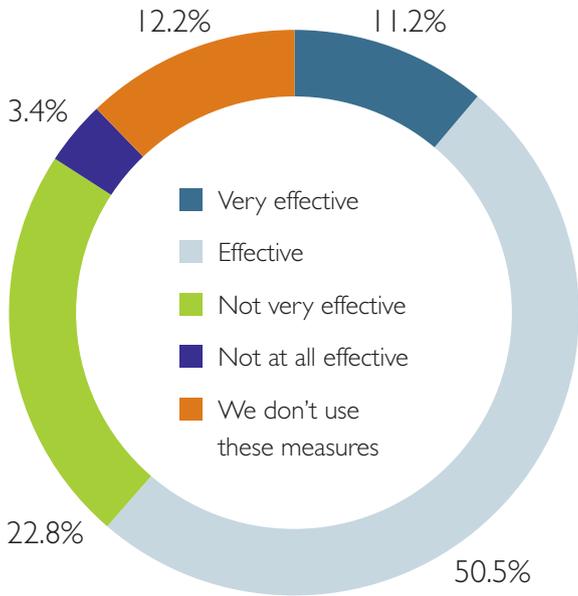


24. Why would you report a crime to the police?

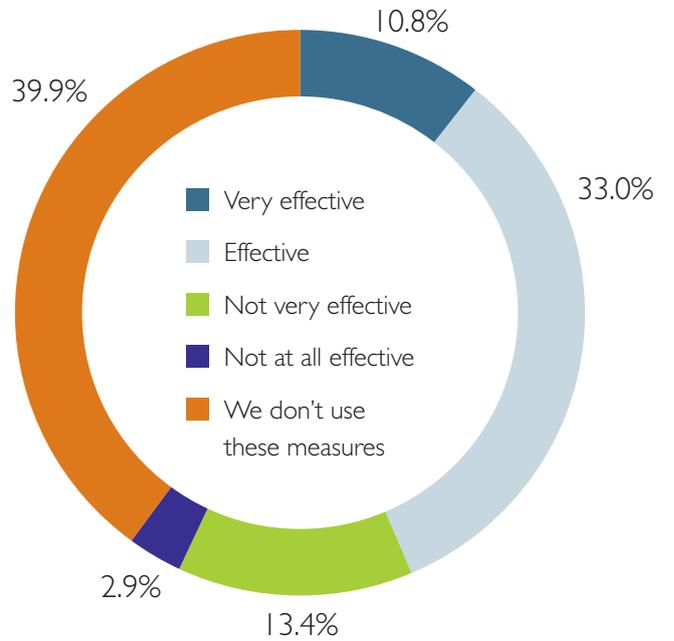


25. How effective are the following crime deterrents for your business/sites?

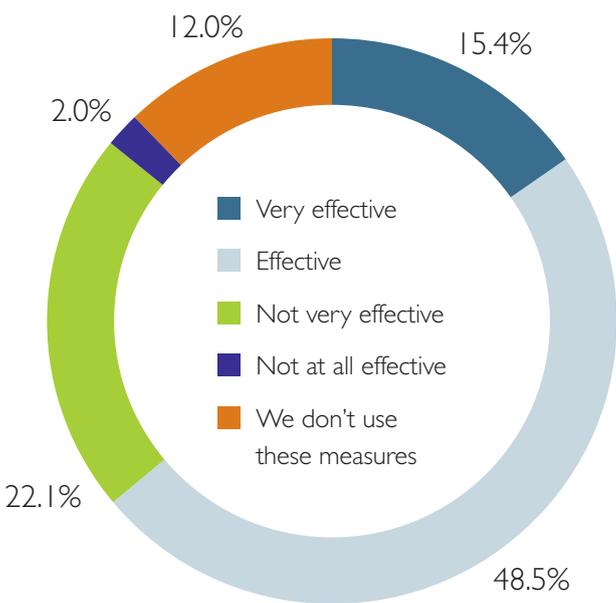
25.1 Security guards



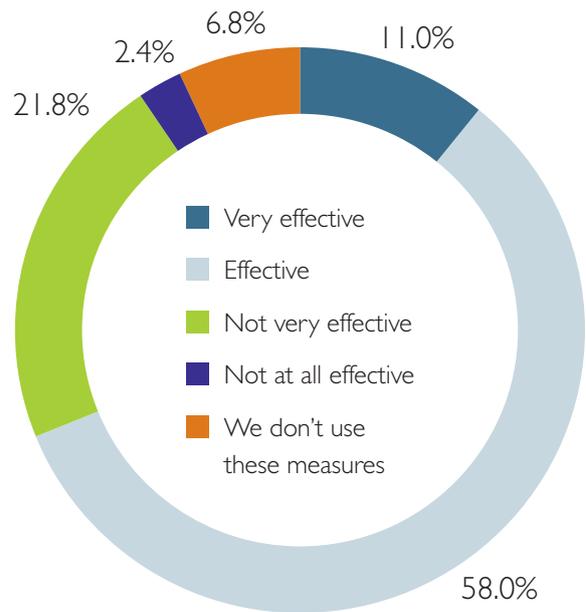
25.2 Security dogs



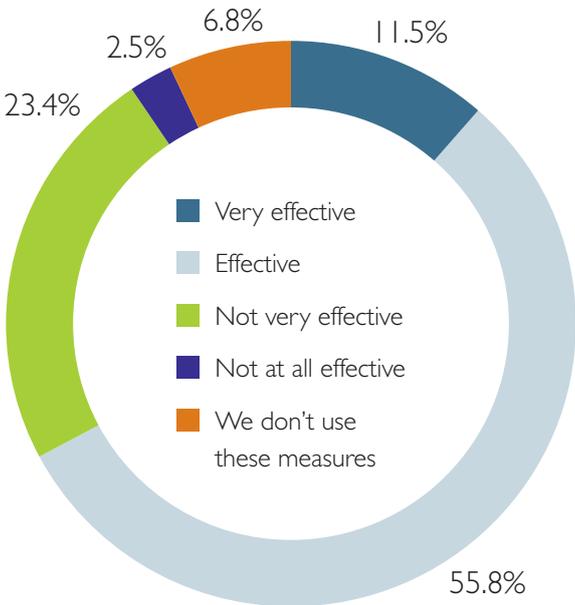
25.3 CCTV



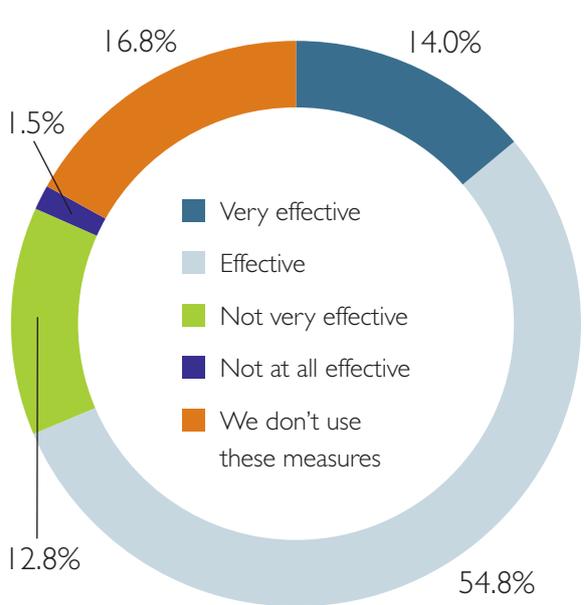
25.4 Enhanced lighting



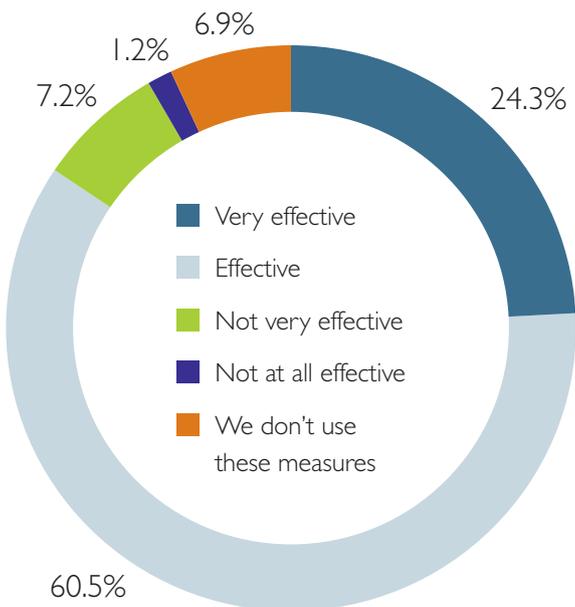
25.5 Heavy-duty barriers/gates



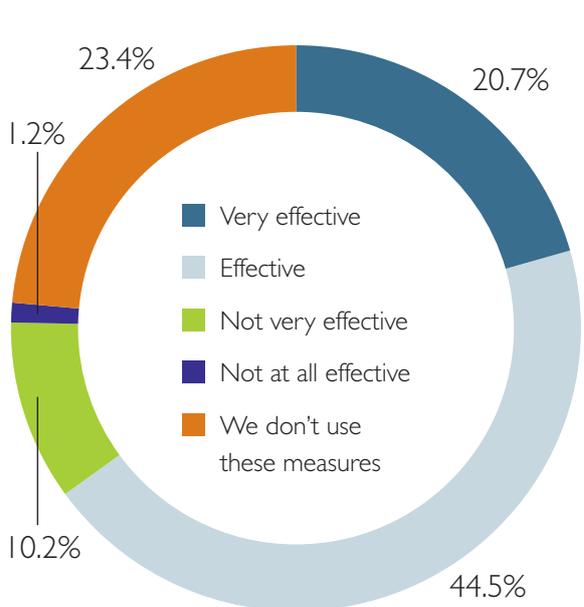
25.6 Locking points for immobilisation of plant



25.7 Secure storage for high value equipment/supplies



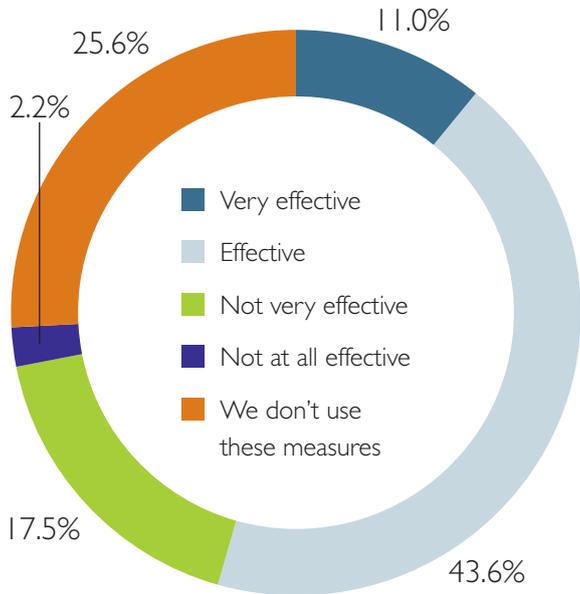
25.8 Plant & vehicles are fitted with tracking systems or unique identification



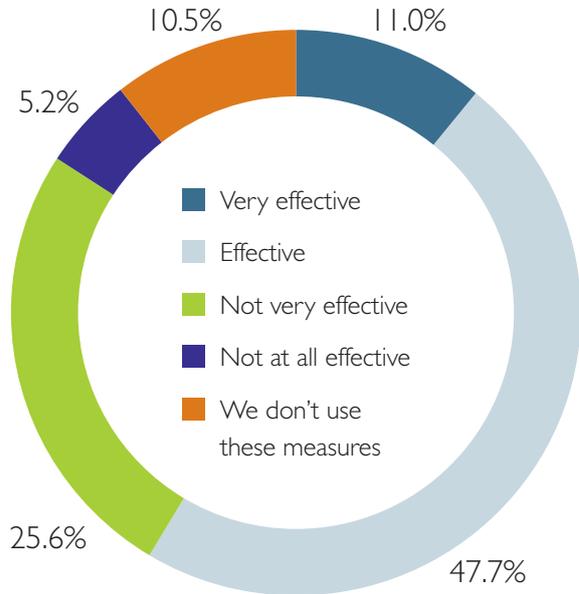
The results show that secure storage for equipment is the most effective security measure; overall, 85% of respondents indicate that this method is effective.

26. With regards to employees, how effective are the following security measures?

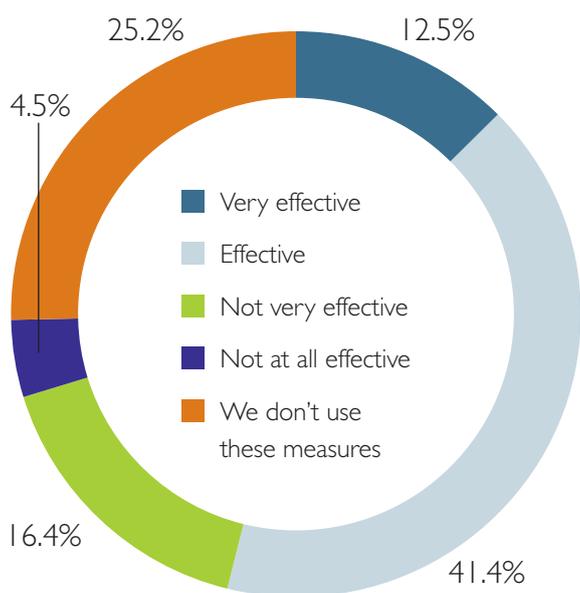
26.1 Criminal record checks (all staff)



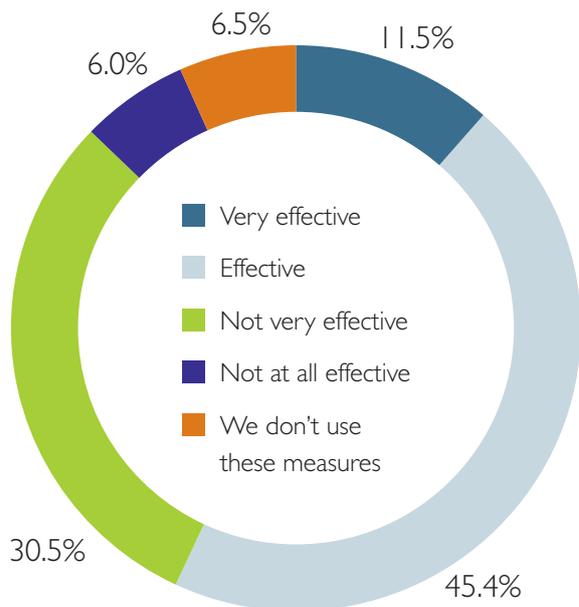
26.2 Qualifications checked (all staff)



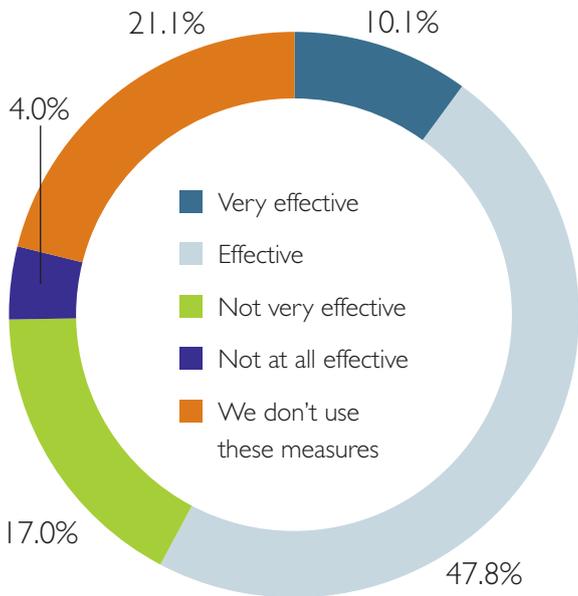
26.3 Immigration visa permit checks



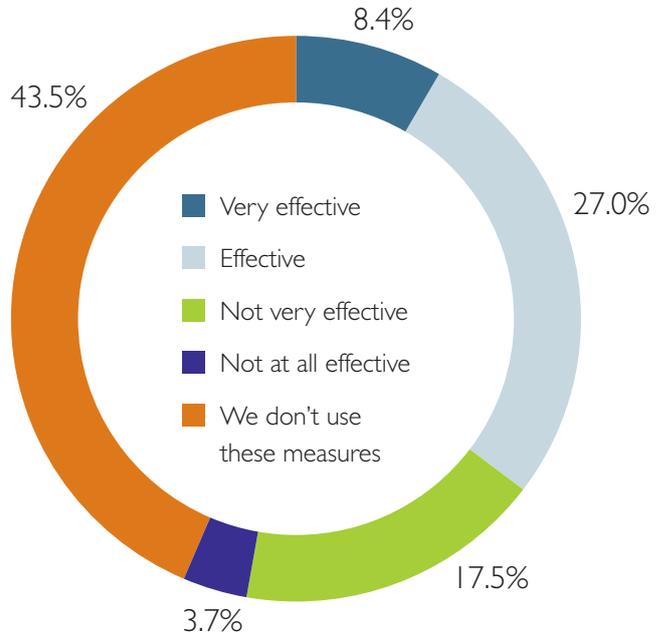
26.4 Reference check with previous employer



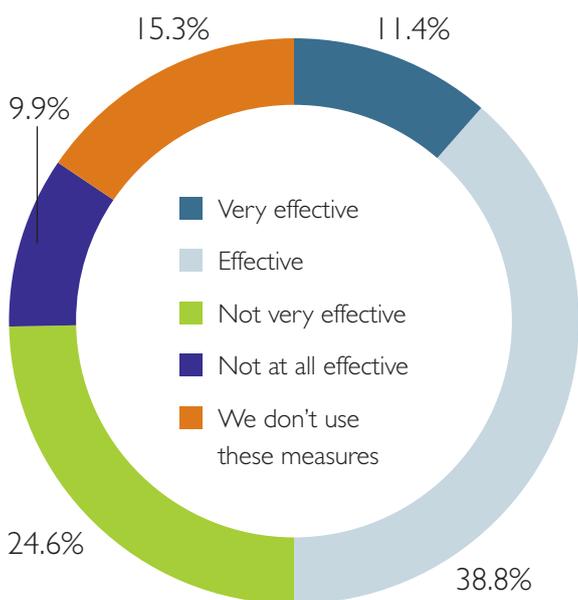
26.5 Identity checks e.g. passports



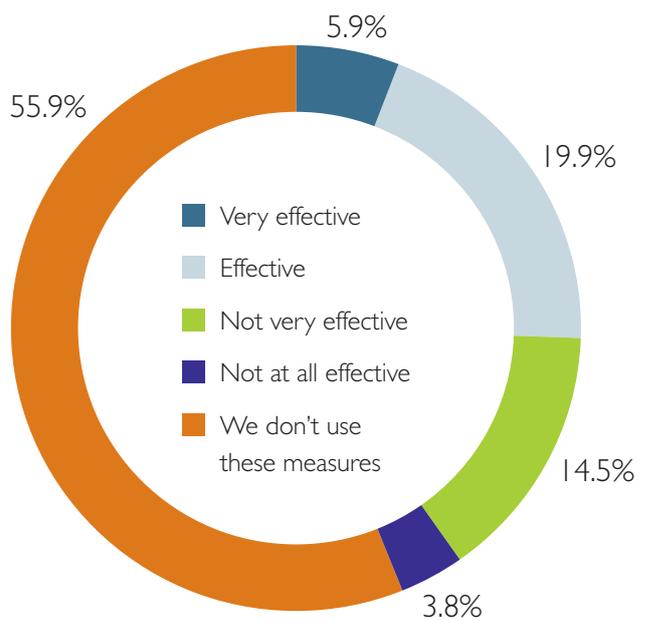
26.6 Regular drug checks



26.7 CSCS card scheme

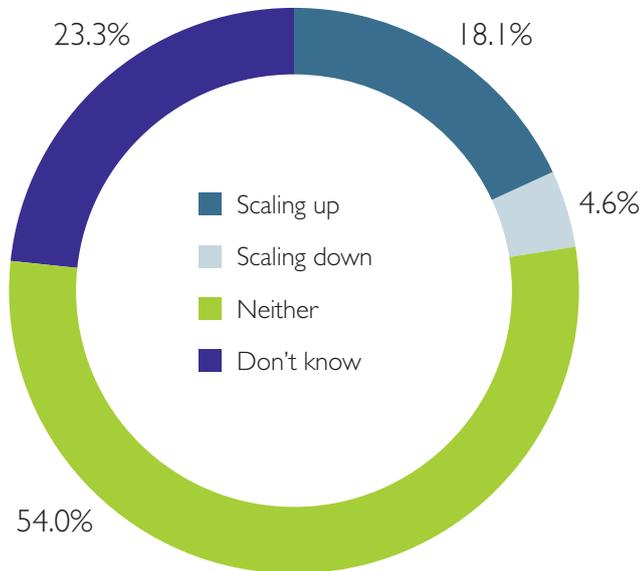


26.8 Biometrics

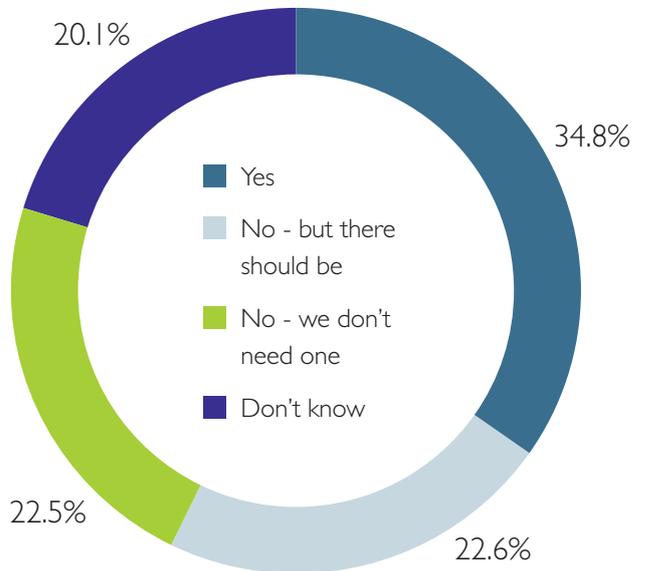


The results are quite similar for each category, but respondents indicate that identity checks are most effective; overall, 58% say they are effective in their company.

27. Is your company scaling down or scaling up its investment in security?



28. Does your company have an anonymous crime reporting (whistle-blowing) system?



On further analysis:

Respondents who have experience of whistle blowing systems reveal mixed feelings. The majority feel it can be effective, with the proviso that the information is used carefully (as misreporting is common).

Discussion

Crime in the construction industry

The occurrence of crime in the construction industry varies considerably. While some respondents say they have encountered only a small amount of petty crime throughout their careers, others have come across more substantial levels of crime on several occasions. These range from petty thefts to being targeted by criminal organisations. It is clear from the survey that everyone in the industry has a different experience of crime, which cannot be represented by statistics. However, the general picture shows that the majority has only suffered a limited amount of crime such as petty theft and vandalism.

The location of the project greatly affects both the amount and type of crime that occurs. Crime tends to increase when working in or around cities and big towns, and the nature of crime tends to vary in different regions. Certain areas in the north west of England, plus Scotland and Ireland have all experienced more organised crime than other regions.

Not surprisingly, theft, vandalism and health and safety neglect are the most common crimes in the construction industry; 92% of respondents are aware of theft occurring in their company, 91% have been affected by vandalism, and 90% are conscious of health and safety neglect. Kidnap (11%), money laundering (22%) and racketeering (22%) were the least common crimes in the industry.

Some crimes affected sectors in the industry more than others. For example, only 1% of respondents working in the housing industry had not experienced theft or vandalism; 76% had experienced arson and 75% assault, both figures higher than the average shown in the graph below.

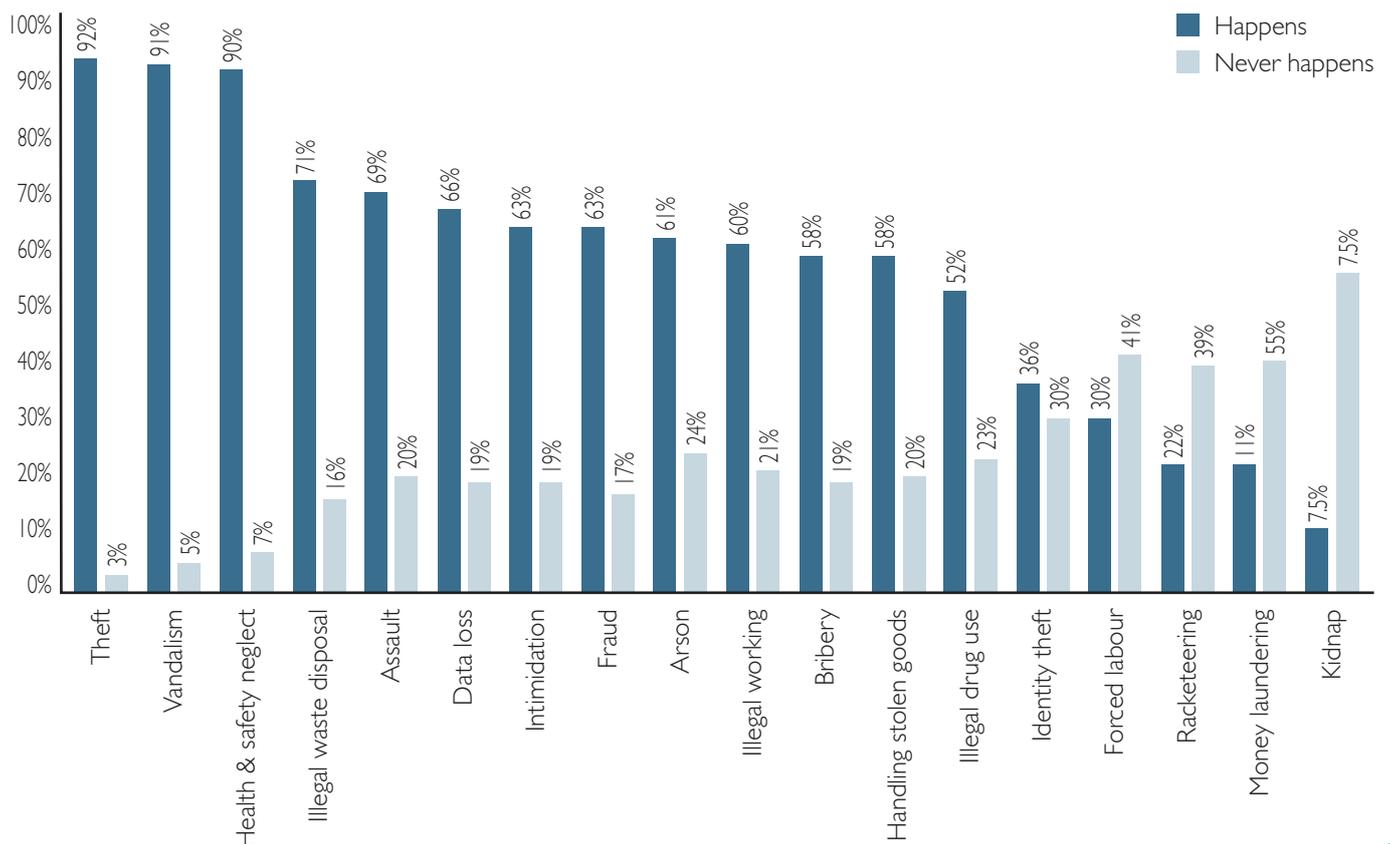
The cost of crime in the industry

The industry suffers a substantial financial loss each year. The survey shows that 38% of respondents' companies suffer a loss of at least £10,000 a year, with 9% of companies losing more than £100,000 a year.

When the total annual cost of crime is broken down into locations, the amounts differ quite significantly. London and the south east and north west of England suffer the highest losses as a result of crime. Of the respondents who state that crime costs their company more than £10,000, 14% are located in the south east, 12% in London and 12% in the north west. Respondents who report company losses of under £10,000 are located in the south east of England (14%), Ireland (11%) and the south west of England (10%).

As expected, the cost of crime also varies depending on company size: the bigger the company, the higher the losses. The majority (52%) of respondents who work for companies with over 501 employees estimate losses above £10,000; the majority of respondents (48%) working for companies with fewer than 20 employees experience losses of less than £5000.

Graph showing crime in the construction industry



Crime against property

Crime against property includes instances of theft, vandalism and arson. Very few respondents have no experience of theft or vandalism in their construction careers, and similar results are shown across all sectors of the industry. A number of reasons might contribute to the high rate of such crimes, including site location and security, the nature of the construction workforce (with many different workers onsite everyday), and the illegal market that exists for construction equipment.

Tools and building materials are most susceptible to theft, with 83% of respondents experiencing theft of these items on a site where they had worked. The majority of respondents believe that sub-contracted staff are the perpetrators or that they do not know who has committed the theft.

The survey indicates that the theft of plant is not as common as the theft of other equipment, and only 29% of respondents are aware of plant being stolen from a site where they had worked. Third parties are most often identified for committing plant theft; comments suggest that it is mainly opportunist criminals stealing plant that has been left unattended.

Vandalism levels reported in the survey are high, the majority having experienced every kind of vandalism explored in the survey. Graffiti and site damage are particular problems, with three quarters of respondents having experienced these forms of vandalism. Respondents either do not know the culprits or implicate third parties for committing most acts of vandalism. Further comments suggest that youths are mainly responsible for causing this damage and that it would be worse in cities and big towns.

Incidents of arson in the industry appear to be quite rare. 27% respondents had experienced a minor fire on a site where they had worked and 15% a major fire that was intended to damage the site. The majority of respondents who have experienced arson state that a third party was responsible for the fire.

Serious crime

The industry is susceptible to criminal organisations that exploit aspects of construction practices. In this survey, we focused on the issue of rogue security and found that instances are low. However, those who did experience this aspect of organised crime had some very interesting stories to share. Overall, only 8% of respondents have direct experience of rogue security; the regions particularly affected are Scotland (25%), Ireland (16%) and the north west of England (13%). This crime is also a factor internationally (13%). 25% of those aware of this criminal activity occurring state that it has happened in the last twelve months.

Those affected by these organisations were asked about the event that occurred, and many had similar experiences. A security guard company would approach the site and offer to provide security; intimidation, thefts and vandalism would occur if this was refused and would continue until the security was accepted.

Some respondents cite instances where the security company used physical threats and, in some cases, actually harmed site workers. Many comments indicate that equipment and plant would be stolen but then suddenly reappear once the security guards were employed. There were also examples of territorial disputes between rogue security guard companies, with construction sites caught in the middle. Interestingly, other comments indicate that despite the security company being illegitimate, it was still the best firm to use (and, in some cases, recommend) since it would guarantee other criminals not targeting the site.

Offsite crime

The survey also explored issues such as the employment of illegal immigrants, fraud, and the interference with and theft of IT systems.

Respondents were asked if they had noticed a change over the past year in the number of illegal immigrants working in the construction industry. 20% state there has been an increase and 26% report no change. Only 14% have noticed a decrease in the last twelve months, despite recent reports stating many migrants, both legal and illegal, are leaving the UK.

Respondents who did report a decrease are mainly located in Ireland (20%), London (10%) and the south east of England (10%). However, these are also the top three regions where respondents report an increase or no change.

82% of respondents indicate that illegal workers are taken on because it reduces labour costs, which suggests they are hired knowingly rather than because of an error in human resources. Businesses need to be aware of the Civil Penalties which may be imposed by UKBA for employing illegal workers (up to £10 000 per employee in 2009).

Illegal waste disposal and the theft of (or interference with) IT systems are the most common forms of crime under this category. 58% of respondents have experienced illegal waste disposal and 54% have known of the IT system being targeted. However, these crimes are not very frequent and, apart from illegal waste disposal, not very big issues in the industry.

In all cases explored, about a third of respondents have experienced fraud in their business and it has not been a frequent occurrence. It is interesting that when respondents were asked who they thought was most likely to commit fraud, managers, finance personnel and IT staff were not the top responses – contract staff (30%) and trade staff (30%) were.

Recommendations

Prevention

Respondents were asked about the effectiveness of security measures to help protect the construction site and equipment, as well as those designed to ensure the workforce can work onsite.

In terms of site security, the majority have used each of the methods explored. The most popular security measures are enhanced lighting and secure storage, which are both used by 93% of respondents. These methods are also identified as the most effective, with 85% stating secure storage is effective and 69% stating enhanced lighting is effective (although the comments highlight the need to ensure lights are connected to CCTV). Using locking points to immobilise plant is also considered effective by 68% of respondents and heavy-duty barriers/gates by 67%.

No security measure stands out as being particularly effective for monitoring staff onsite. The most common measures are reference checks (94%), qualification checks (90%) and the CSCS card scheme (85%). Despite these high figures, generally only around half of the respondents consider these measures to be effective. The CSCS card scheme has the highest number of respondents who feel the measure is not at all effective, commenting that this is because of frequent forgeries.

1. Site and project managers must know how to deal with crime

Training needs to incorporate elements of preventing crime on the construction site and knowing how best to deal with crime that occurs. Considering the possibility of crime at the beginning of the project can save time and money.

2. IT systems should be utilised to monitor access to sites and equipment registers

An IT system should be in place that keeps an up-to-date employee database. Using electronic entrance systems connected to the database will prevent illegitimate access. Electronic equipment registers are also useful in keeping a record of who last used the equipment and when; this will allow equipment to be tracked if it goes missing. IT systems can greatly benefit the security of the site.

3. Security guards must be registered with the Security Industry Authority

To ensure the legitimacy of security-guard companies used for onsite security they must be registered with the SIA. When working onsite security staff must wear a current SIA issued Blue Badge. Hiring companies that are not registered could result in funding organised crime.

4. All crime should be reported

There is clear underreporting of crime in the construction industry. Although evidence has suggested many feel that reporting crime will not have a successful result, it could help to prevent it from reoccurring. As crime trends are recognised the opportunities for target hardening and detection of organised crime increase.

5. All employees should have identity and reference checks

There are various tools available to ensure employees have sufficient qualifications, status and experience to work in the industry. All employees should have pre-employment reference checks, qualification checks and identity checks, this includes both directly employed and sub-contracted staff. Those that are not properly qualified could be a health and safety risk.

6. Plant and equipment should be kept securely to prevent theft

Results have shown that the most effective theft deterrents are secure storage and enhanced lighting. All plant and equipment should be stored securely and registered. Taking such measures would reduce the possibility of theft and ensure successful recovery if it did occur.

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- Promoting the built environment as central to the quality of life for everyone everywhere.
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The Chartered Institute of Building

Englemere, Kings Ride, Ascot
Berkshire SL5 7TB, United Kingdom

e: reception@ciob.org.uk w: www.ciob.org.uk

t: +44 (0)1344 630 700 f: +44 (0)1344 630 777

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