

INVESTIGATING HISTORY



All About the Mob in America

Origins of Organized Crime in the United States

Groups of criminals have worked together around the world, including in the United States, for centuries.

Organized crime did not become a big concern in America until around the 1900s though.

Between 1890 and 1920, 20 million immigrants moved to the United States. They came to America looking for better lives. Some immigrants were able to realize their dreams, but many faced discrimination. It was hard to find jobs and homes for many immigrants.

Some people turned to a life of crime. The lack of opportunities created a fertile ground for criminal operations.

Some ran underground lotteries, boxing tournaments or illegal casinos. Others sold imported products like artichokes or tomatoes at inflated prices. A few even ran violent extortion rings, using verbal threats or physical violence to force a victim to give up their money, property or other valuables. All of these schemes were known as rackets.

Not all mobsters were new immigrants, and mobsters in the United States come from every ethnic, cultural and religious group.

What is the Mob?

The Mob describes a group of criminals working together in a highly organized system.

Some people use the “Mob” and the “Mafia” interchangeably. The Mafia describes organized crime groups of Italian descent. The Mob may refer to mobsters of any ethnic, cultural, religious or national origin.

Prohibition (1920-1933)



Al Capone was an incredibly successful bootlegger in Chicago. He ran the North Side Gang, which operated illegal bars known as speakeasies and smuggled alcohol into the United States from Canada.

Prohibition was the 18th Amendment to the Constitution, which outlawed alcohol in the United States. Prohibition was in effect from 1920-1933. During Prohibition, Americans could not sell, make or transport alcohol, but that did not stop people from drinking it.

Americans turned to bootlegging, or making and selling illegal alcohol. Organized crime spread as small neighborhood gangs began to create large bootlegging operations. Prohibition was the best thing that ever happened to the Mob. Mobsters became millionaires and household names.

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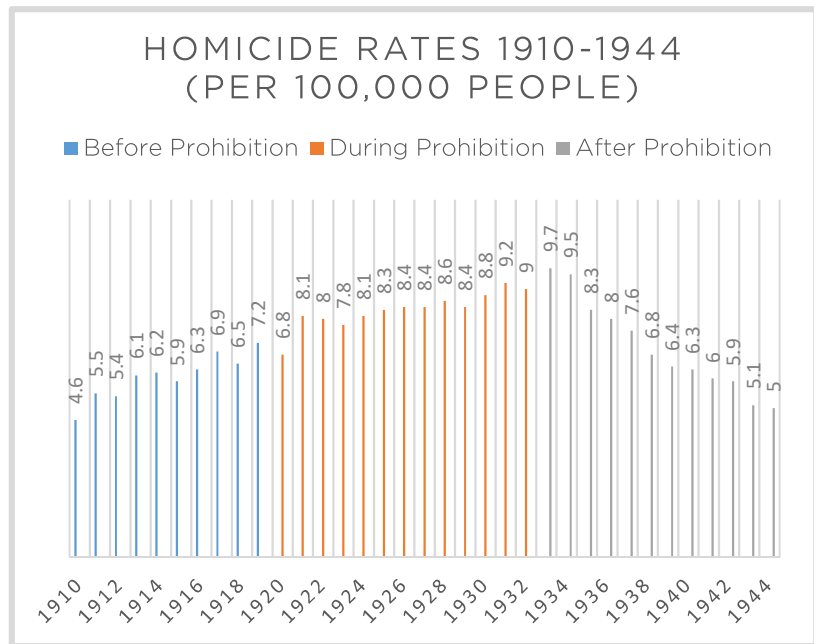


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The End of Prohibition

The 18th Amendment was repealed in 1933 by the 21st Amendment. People grew tired of Prohibition for many reasons. Initially, Americans who supported Prohibition believed alcohol's harmful effects outweighed people's right to drink. Supporters believed outlawing alcohol would help America become healthier and safer.

Crime did not vanish. Homicide rates increased. In 1919, the national homicide rate was 7.2 per 100,000 people. By 1933, it had climbed to 9.7. Many blamed these deaths on the Mob, as gang turf wars erupted.



There were many problems with Prohibition. It was unpopular and challenging for law enforcement agents to implement. In 1929, the United States entered the Great Depression. The nation needed the tax revenue that legal alcohol could provide. Prohibition also took away jobs in restaurants, bars, hotels, breweries, distilleries and transportation companies.

The Kefauver and Rackets Committees

In 1950, the federal government became more involved with the fight against organized crime. Senator Estes Kefauver created the Senate Committee to Investigate Crime in Interstate Commerce in order to probe the Mob. The committee conducted 27 hearings in 14 cities from 1950-1951. These hearings were televised, and more than 30 million Americans watched them. Although few mobsters were willing to share important information, it was the first time many Americans realized how big organized crime was in the United States. After the Kefauver hearings, very little changed. There were few arrests and no federal policy changes, but the public could no longer deny that organized crime existed.

In 1957, Senator John McClellan formed the Select Committee on Improper Activities in Labor and Management, also known as the Rackets or McClellan Committee. The Committee met from 1957-1960 and questioned more than 1,500 witnesses connected to organized crime. Mobsters were still hesitant to give up their secrets.

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The RICO Act and Modern Organized Crime

The Rackets Committee led to important legislation: the RICO Act. The Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) Act was passed in 1970 to address the challenge of prosecuting Mob bosses. RICO makes it illegal to be a part of any racketeering organization. It closed loopholes that exempted a person from standing trial if they did not personally commit a crime.

Since the Rackets Committee, a series of laws and groups have worked to dismantle organized crime. Traditional Mob groups are not as powerful, but organized crime still exists. The 21st century has ushered in a global network of criminals that could not have existed without modern technology. Criminals increasingly operate on a global scale. International law enforcement agencies have strengthened their collaborations to combat these new groups.



Robert Kennedy served as chief counsel for the Rackets Committee and then as U.S. attorney general. In both roles, he fought the Mob. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

Reflection Questions

1. What conditions contributed to the rise of the Mob in the United States?
2. Evaluate this statement: Prohibition was the best thing that ever happened to the Mob. Do you agree? Why or why not?
3. Did organized crime lead to the repeal of Prohibition? Explain to what extent you feel this is a fair assessment of Prohibition.
4. How did the Kefauver and Rackets Committees affect organized crime?
5. Does the Mob exist today? Elaborate on modern organized crime.

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