[Organized Crime in the 1920’s and Prohibition](https://www.thefinertimes.com/20th-Century-Crime/organised-crime-in-the-1920s.html)

Written by Tim Nash

Crime - 20th Century Crime

*Organized Crime in the 1920’s – Prohibition*

What a time the 1920’s was, with the party atmosphere it was certainly a time of great criminal activity, with the prohibition laws in America and the world in an economic depression.

The people turned more and more to criminal activity, organized criminals such as the American mobsters and European crime syndicates thrived, most common people looked upon these organizations as heroes.

Criminals like [Al Capone](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al_Capone), [Bonnie and Clyde](https://www.thefinertimes.com/20th-Century-Crime/the-legendary-of-bonnie-and-clyde.html) and [John Dillinger](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Dillinger) were headliners of the era.

Jobs were scarce and people needed to provide for their families, gangsterism was dangerous but provided an easy way to make money. When the American government passed the Eighteenth amendments outlawing alcohol, people who enjoyed a drink became criminal for doing so.

It was organized crime who supplied the booze. In January of 1920 the American government banned the sale and supply of alcohol, the government thought that this would curb crime and violence, [prohibition](https://www.thefinertimes.com/20th-Century-Crime-Articles/prohibition-in-the-1920s.html) did not achieve it’s goals, leading more toward higher crime rates and excessive violence.

Alcohol was seen as the devils advocate and banning the substance would help improve the quality of American lives. It caused an explosive growth in crime with more than double the amount of illegal bars and saloons operating than before prohibition.

The government set up the "Federal Prohibition Bureau" to police prohibition, this did not deter people and organized crime continued to be the main supplier of booze.

With a large coastline it was almost impossible to police with only five percent of alcohol ever being confiscated.

Bribing government officials was common, and people were increasingly crafty in the way they would hide alcohol such as hollowed out canes, false books and hip flasks. Violence on the streets increased as did unemployment.

The closure of all alcohol related industries was the main reason behind increased unemployment, hard working Americans suddenly were drinking a banned substance.

Police resources used to fight other crime were diverted to the prevention of alcohol consumption. The Criminal gangs that supplied the booze were ruthless with over inflated prices, often fighting each other for control of the trade. A whole black market was created around alcohol.

The quality of alcohol was poor and many people became sick, deaths from alcohol poisoning had risen 400%, people will argue that alcohol was less easily obtainable before prohibition since the bootlegging industry was so immense, you could purchase alcohol on almost any street in America, many home products were of poor quality however people were very inventive about the making of home alcohol.

Although a great idea in concept, prohibition was ultimately a failure; the public grew less respectful of the law. Drink driving increased and public drunkenness also increased.

After thirteen long years the government finally saw that prohibition was not working, it had in fact created more of a problem than it solved, finally the government abolished the prohibition laws.

Crime decreased and the criminal element was taken out of the industry, organized crime in the 1920's flourished in America because of prohibition and it did not stop there, after the prohibition era they simply went on to other markets with their new found wealth.

Had prohibition never happened organized crime syndicates may not have become so wealthy or powerful.

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Mafia Is Down-but Not Out

Crime Families Adapt to Survive, Lowering Profile and Using Need-to-Know Tactics

By SEAN GARDINER and PERVAIZ SHALLWANI

For more than two decades, New York City's five organized-crime families were plagued by convictions brought on by strengthened federal laws and the increasing habit of higher-ranking members cooperating with the government.

Those years of high-profile decline created a perception that the city's mafia is on the verge of extinction. But law-enforcement officials and mob experts say the five families, while not the force they once were, are far from sleeping with the fishes. They have survived, the experts said, because of their persistence and ability to adapt.

"I don't know that I'd say La Cosa Nostra was what it was in its heyday but I wouldn't say by any means it's gone away," said Richard Frankel, special agent in charge of the Criminal Division for the Federal Bureau of Investigation's New York office.

Mr. Frankel, who supervises the FBI's organized crime squads in New York, said he believes the city's Cosa Nostra has quietly staged a comeback and is now more powerful than it has been in years.

Despite the waves of prosecutions, each of the five mafia "borgatas"-the Genovese, Gambino, Luchese, Bonanno and Colombo-"still exists and each still has its hierarchy," said John Buretta, a former federal prosecutor who headed the organized-crime unit for the U.S. attorney's office in Brooklyn.

One recent indictment that attests to organized crime's staying power, authorities said, is the Jan. 23 arrest of 78-year-old Vincent "Vinnie" Asaro, in connection with the 1978 Lufthansa heist of $6 million in cash and jewels at John F. Kennedy Airport.

The reputed Bonanno captain and four other reputed Bonanno members were charged with running a loan-sharking, extortion, gambling and murder enterprise from 1969- nine years before the Lufthansa robbery- to the present day. The defendants have pleaded not guilty.

The five families are no longer the federal government's top criminal concern in New York City. Counterterrorism and other criminal networks- such as Russian, Balkan, Asian and African organized syndicates that generally coexist peacefully and sometimes collaborate with the five families- have attracted investigators away from La Cosa Nostra, Mr. Frankel said.

Years ago, the FBI had a squad dedicated to each family. Now there are two: C-5, which handles the Genoveses, Bonannos and Colombos, and C-16, assigned to the Gambinos and Lucheses. A 2010 audit by the Justice Department's Office of the Inspector General found that after Sept. 11, 2001, organized crime is the FBI's sixth priority behind terrorism, espionage, cybercrime, public corruption and protecting civil rights.

At the NYPD, amid budget squeezes, the current 5,000-detective headcount is about 2,000 below the 2002 level. There has been an "across the board" reduction of detectives in precincts and specialty squads including organized crime, said Michael Palladino, president of the NYPD's detectives' union. The number of detectives investigating organized crime has remained stable in the past three years, though. The NYPD didn't return a request for comment.

As the ranks of organized-crime investigators decreased, the mafia adapted to law enforcement's investigative techniques. Unlike the in-your-face approach that media mob star John Gotti adopted in the 1980s, today's mafia has reverted to its roots and tried to become as invisible as possible, officials and experts say.

For instance, the Genovese family, which has traditionally been the largest, most powerful and most secretive, now likely uses a rotating panel of leaders to run day-to-day affairs to avoid any one boss from being targeted by prosecutors, Mr. Buretta said. Other crime families use a "street boss" model where lesser-known mobsters carry out the orders of imprisoned leaders, he said.

Today's crime families are also less territorial and more open to collaboration than the mobsters of past decades, said Inspector John Denesopolis, the commanding officer of the New York Police Department's Organized Crime unit. "As long as they are earning, they are less concerned," he said.

Another emerging trend in the past several years, Mr. Denesopolis said, is mafia families emulating the need-to-know tactics seen in terrorist cells- one group in the family isn't made aware of what crimes another group in the same family is involved in.

What hasn't changed much since the 1930s are the five families' bread and butter crimes: loan-sharking, extortion, gambling, narcotics and infiltrating organized labor, Mr. Frankel said. They aren't as involved in sophisticated financial frauds -such as stock pump-and-dump scams- as they were in the early 1990s, Mr. Frankel said. But they are resourceful when it comes to new opportunities, he added, citing recent prosecutions of offshore Internet gambling websites and trafficking in Viagra.

Hundreds of inducted members in the five families are still behind these enterprises. The Genovese lead with close to 200 such "made" men, while the Colombos and Lucheses are the smallest, with about 100 each, said Jerry Capeci, a longtime crime reporter who operates the website Gang Land News. The numbers are less than years ago but not substantially so, he said. There are also several thousand additional criminal associates, Mr. Denesopolis said.

Leadership ranks are also being replenished as many "sophisticated, capable" mafia veterans who are currently incarcerated will soon complete their sentences, said Mark Feldman, chief assistant Brooklyn District Attorney and a former chief of the Brooklyn U.S. Attorney's organized-crime unit.

Law-enforcement officials say one trend has worked in their favor lately: the growing frequency of soldiers and leaders breaking oath of Omerta- the pledge allegiance to the family and agreeing to a code of honor that includes a vow of silence if arrested.

In 2004, Bonanno leader Joseph Massino shocked the underworld by becoming a government witness the first head of one of the five families to do so. He has testified or provided information against other accused mobsters in several cases, including in the latest Lufthansa heist charges. He testified against reputed Bonanno leader Vincent Basciano, who was convicted in 2011 on racketeering and murder charges.

"Joe's cooperation had to shake the confidence in the code of honor in as dramatic a way as any cooperator ever had," Mr. Buretta said.

A recently retired NYPD detective who worked organized crime for more than 20 years, said old-timers followed the rules "to the letter" and would never talk to him or his partners after an arrest. "With these young kids, the rules are just suggestions," he said.

"They're younger, a lot of them have young kids and they don't want to look at 25 to life," he said. We sit them down and tell them, 'Listen, the next the time you pick up your baby daughter she's going to be 27 years old.' "