

In what ways did
prohibition change us
society in the 1920's



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When Prohibition was passed as a law in 1919 the pressure groups who had backed it hoped for a decrease in America's social problems and criminal activities. Instead prohibition appeared to bring about a totally opposite change to the US society; criminal activity increased, not just within organised crime but also throughout the general public who had developed a general disrespect for the law.

Furthermore there was a rise in gangster culture due to the enforcing of prohibition; this also led to disrespect for those who were meant to uphold the law within the general public; as gangsters corrupted policemen so their criminal activities could not be prosecuted in court. To help enforce the prohibition law John. F. Crammer became the prohibition commissioner, with a force of 3000 prohibition agents. However these agents had a very hard job trying to control alcohol smuggling across its borders with Canada to the north and Mexico to the south, as both countries were still producing alcohol which was being transported and smuggled in through the US' vast net work of roads and rail lines and over 18, 000 miles of coastline where rum runners unloaded their boats gave the agents an almost impossible task when also added to the fact they had to check over people's medical prescription to make sure they didn't contain alcohol of more than the allowed limit.

Furthermore the general public were able to buy home brew kits in their local hardware store, this lead to a increase in moonshining, where the normal people of America were producing their own alcohol illegally, if the people were rich enough they would get alcohol delivered to their houses and this practice even reached as high up the social ladder as president Harding who was known to get a regular delivery to the Whitehouse.

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However the moonshine business was controlled by the prohibition agents who seized 300, 000 illegal moonshine stills such as bathtubs. The home brewed alcohol to meet public demand caused poisoning and the death rate from alcohol poisoning rose from 98 to 760 from 1920 to 1926. Criminal activity began to increase with the enforcing of the prohibition law: official statistics from the Philadelphian police show that alcohol related arrests in the five years between 1920 and 1925 rose from 20, 433 to 58, 517; this number shows an increase of over 50% in the short time of five years, furthermore this shows how much alcohol related crime was becoming within US society. Also within the year of 1925 the government estimated that the prohibition agents probably only captured 5% of the illegally made a distributed alcohol within the USA. For many evading the police had become a game, they knew that the prohibition officers were busy trying to stop illegal smuggling of alcohol across the borders so whilst they were engaged somewhere else, the prohibition laws was were being flouted: on a typical night, millions of Americans were making a mockery of prohibition by visiting speakeasies, these clubs were seen as a game as they required a password for acceptance on the door.

Furthermore speakeasies also showed how the American public were disrespecting the law as not only were they buying illegally imported alcohol which was often drunk in tea cups within the speakeasies, but it also showed a support for the prostitution and drug dealing which was organised alongside the speakeasy clubs. It was thought that an American could buy an illegal alcoholic drink within one minute of leaving their home due to the vast number of speakeasies across the country. The influence of drink was most

strongly found in the states that abolished the prohibition law before it even got enforced; these states which included New York resented the interference from the central government and took the law on drinking into their own hands. Although it was in Chicago that grew to become the centre for the distribution of illegally made alcohol however this was linked with its close proximity to the Canadian border and the rail links that went through the city. Furthermore the use of Chicago as a distribution centre meant that the trade in illegal alcohol became an underground business and was placed into the hands of gangsters. The industry of bootlegging and moonshine brought the gangsters a profit of \$2billion annually.

One of the major gangsters of the time, Al Capone made over \$100 million in 1927 due to his illegal activities. There was a vast amount of gang warfare where rival groups fought over land in which to distribute alcohol and to run speakeasies. In total there were 130 gangland killings in Chicago alone in 1926-1927. These violent murders reached their peak on the 14th February 1929 when several members of Bugs Moran's men were shot dead in the St. Valentines day massacre furthermore within the 1920's there were 500 prohibition agents killed by gangsters.

However not everything between the gangsters and the prohibition agents ended in violence although it was another thing that wasn't needed within the us society: corruption caused by the gangster giving bribes not only extended past prohibition agents to local police officials, but all the way up the legal system to judges and state officials. This led to the gangsters being protected to run prostitution and drugs rackets if they had the officials in their power therefore meaning that if they were brought to the attention of <https://assignbuster.com/in-what-ways-did-prohibition-change-us-society-in-the-1920s/>

the law, the cases were quite often thrown out before they ever got to court. The society that the prohibition supporters wished to protect with the passing of the law to restrict the drinking and manufacture of alcohol never really worked, far from keeping preserving the 'true American values' of respecting god and the family, the prohibition created a crime wave that spread across the states. Disrespect for the new law steadily increased and worked its way through all levels of society from the average American all the way up to the president. During this time the new law gave way to the illegal dealings of the gangsters who were in control of all aspects of breaking the new legislation.

Far from doing what it was intended to do; prohibition changed the American society into one of law breaking and disrespect.