

Prohibition and gangster culture

[History](#), [American History](#)



The era of prohibition starting in 1920 sparked gangster culture in America. The 18th Amendment ratified on January 1, 1920 banned the production, sale, and transportation of alcohol. Millions of Americans were against the new anti-booze legislation, especially with the Jazz Age in full swing. Speakeasies flourished in the urban communities supplied with bootleg liquor from the country's more serious criminals. The market for the illegal commodity was satisfied by the gangster community, introducing the country to the domination of organized crime and gang movements exemplified by the infamous, most well-known original gangster, Al Capone. Progressives and temperance activists rejoiced after prohibition was ratified, they saw a future of decreased violence and crime rates and a more wholistic and moral society, but the influx of the American Mafia counteracted their hopes for the prohibition movement. In the late 1890s and early 1900s the rush of twelve million New Immigrants, predominately from southern and eastern Europe, helped to establish the American Mafia, with five hundred thousand of them being first generation Italian Americans residing in New York City alone. The American Mafia was comprised of first generation Italian American immigrants who are commonly defined as a highly organized community for serious criminals. The rise of gangsterism was not in the progressives' algorithm for a more productive nation, organized crime rates spiked, and the prevalence of alcohol remained unchanged. Because of the new legislation criminals took it upon themselves to provide alcohol to speakeasies at a great price. The American Mafia's success in alcohol trade inspired the push toward illegal drug operations, organization of prostitution, and excessive gambling as well as gaining

access to labor unions of the major city businesses granting them operationally control from the inside.

Al Capone, a second generation Italian American, became one of the country's most well-known, and feared, mobsters. Capone moved from New York City to Chicago in 1920 after his father's sudden death. Rather than the typical factory job, Capone picked up his first job working to spark fear into Johnny Torrio's rival bootleggers so that they would give up their grounds to his up and coming gangster empire. After a near death experience caused by confrontation with rival gangs, Torrio gave up his livelihood to Capone, hoping Capone could create the Chicago empire that Torrio never accomplished. Capone's work as a bootlegger and a black-market connection for the cities best speakeasies made him the face of Chicago's gangster culture. After a bootlegged whiskey smuggle went wrong, Al Capone had his long-time friend's rival gang murdered at a Christmas party, now known as "The Adonis Club Massacre", but Capone was never tried for the murders. From this point on Capone was seen as much more than a young bootlegger, he was feared by other gangs and was known as a man that would not back down to anyone. Capone created the gangster empire to beat, with today's inflation rates Capone had a net worth of approximately 1.3 billion dollars, grossed one hundred million dollars annually, employed nearly six hundred gangsters, and was clean from murder charges for the extent of his career.

Corruption in higher government left millions of Americans hopeless for a better future. Gangster culture had a direct connection with the lack of trust the American people had in the leaders of their country. In many cases

Capone paid off witnesses, police officers, and renowned politicians to look the other way. The Treasury Department agents were in charge of enforcing national prohibition and eliminating any alcohol, but even they could be paid off for the right price. Capone's oldest brother moved away from the big cities, settling in Nebraska and renaming himself Richard Joseph Hart to deny any association with the actions of his younger brother. Hart led a different life than Capone and ironically became a Prohibition officer in charge of tracking down bootleggers and violators of the Volstead act, those illegally selling alcohol during prohibition. Capone's idea of using his money to make problems for himself and his gang disappear through bribery, show parallels with the culture of consumerism in America's 1920s when people shopped frivolously with no fear of repercussion.

Al Capone became one of the most well-known and feared gangsters of them all, but more than just a gangster the American people loved to hate him. Infamy came with the job and in the 1920s everyone needed someone to fawn over. The rise of celebrities included film actors, athletes, and infamous gangsters like Capone. The Great Depression struck American economy harder than ever, but the gangsters grossing over one hundred million dollars a year were mildly affected. There was a softer side to Al Capone and many other mobsters, Capone opened one of the nation's first free soup kitchens during the economic depression. Not only did Capone employ and feed the hungry with the introduction of his free soup kitchen, but he also bettered his public reputation and stimulated a trend of community services in the city's elite. Although he was no role model, Capone grasped the

attention of many and distracted them from the desperate times characterized by a tanked economy.

In 1927 President Hubert Hoover told the secretary of Treasury, Andrew Mellon, he wanted Capone off the streets and in prison regardless of how minor the crime may be. In May of 1929 Capone went to see a movie in Philadelphia, but on his way out of the cinema he was arrested and jailed for the carrying of a concealed weapon. Capone was held in the Eastern Penitentiary until March 16, 1930 when he was released on good behavior, since he was known for being an untemperamental gangster. After his release Capone's name reached the top of America's Most Wanted List and was deemed Public Enemy #1. The mobster was humiliated by these new publications about him and was even quoted saying " I am sick and tired of publicity. I want no more of it. It puts me in a bad light. I just want to be forgotten." Similarly, Capone hated his nickname, " Scarface", that he was given after a knife fight with a man who was defending the honor of his sister who Capone had verbally humiliated. The small man was left no chance against Capone in a standard fist fight, to better his odds he pulled a knife on the mobster leaving him in pool of his own blood and with scars all along one half of his face. Capone tried to hide his scars and facial obstructions by turning his head the other way in photographs, the dreaded nickname since it only reminded Capone of the brutal fist fight gone wrong.

In 1931 Al Capone was caught on five counts of tax evasion, two of which were felonies, equaling \$32, 488. 81. The grand jury reassembled after further investigation and caught Capone on twenty-two counts of tax evasion

and him and his gang totaling more than five thousand violations of the Volstead Act. The original plan was for Capone to plead guilty to his more minor charges so that he would be limited to a five-year sentence. When the press caught ear of Capone's plea bargain they were outraged by the lengths taken to protect a guilty and dangerous man. On October 6, 1931 Capone's jury was switched out with another one in the court house, Judge Wilkinson out smarted Capone's gang who had planned to pay off many of the case's jurors. The next day Al Capone was sentenced to eleven years in federal prison for major tax evasion.

In 1934 Capone was one of the first prisoners to be moved to Alcatraz allowing the government to brag about their tough, new penitentiary that could hold the nation's most dangerous criminals. Capone suffered from syphilis, so he spent much of his time with the doctors of Alcatraz. Capone made a connection with one specific doctor, Doctor Hess and his nurse Ping. Although he was a dangerous gangster for the extent of his life, Capone was always depicted as a kindhearted man, initiating a sort of friendship between Capone and Dr. Hess. Hess and Ping became the only two care providers Capone allowed to handle him, so he soon became their " specially assigned patient", in words of Hess' daughter Phyllis. Although the two never met, Capone sent Dr. Hess home with gifts for his daughter as he grew to know her through the stories Hess occupied him with. " He had heard I was born in Ohio, so he wrote a song called: ' Beautiful Ohio' and signed it ' for Doctor Hess' little daughter from Al Capone'" Phyllis shared in an interview about her father's relationship with the mobster. The image of a gangster does not do Al Capone justice, for he is much more than his criminal transcripts allow.

Al Capone's eleven-year sentence was cut short at six years due to good behavior at Alcatraz. Capone and his wife retired in Miami, Florida for the remainder of his life. Unfortunately, Capone's tertiary syphilis caused him extreme confusion and constant disorientation. With his wife by his side, Capone lost his life to a heart attack at the age of forty-eight after slowly deteriorating for years. Capone is notorious for shaping Chicago into the violent city it is today, with the trend dating back to his arrival in 1920. Al Capone re-ins as one of the nation's most infamous and successful gangsters whose legacy lives on into the establishment of modern day gang violence and organized crime. The 1920s prohibition era led to America's gangster epidemic, with Al Capone as the face of it all and the progressivists' attempt at a moral society was faced by the awakening of gangster culture.