

Mobster myths revisited

Dan Vergano

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Gangsters never go out of style, but beyond the mobster movies, Al Capone's criminal empire still has lessons for crime-fighters today, criminologists conclude.

Modern-day myths about "The Outfit," the successor to Capone's criminal organization that ran rampant over Chicago for decades, obscure its real role in U.S. history, the *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* review says. Political corruption rather than charismatic criminals was the real story, the criminologists find, and the enduring lesson from the long rise and fall of organized crime in Chicago is that mobsters succeed only when public officials look the other way.

"Members of organized crime rose to power in an unprecedented era of allegiances between criminals and politicians at every level," says social psychologist Arthur Lurigio of Loyola University Chicago, who organized the review. The look back comes as mobster Al Capone, who died in 1947, was back in the news this week, when an auction was announced to sell a letter from his doctor describing his demented final years.

The chief myth about The Outfit is that its power was smashed after Capone's arrest in 1931 on tax evasion and the end of Prohibition. Instead, the review finds that the criminal syndicate flourished by moving into gambling, extortion and vice (its 1961 revenue was estimated at \$6 billion; organized crime took in more than \$20 billion in total that year), and members were virtually immune from arrest and prosecution. They were at least until a homicide conviction of hit man Harry Aleman in 1997 for a shotgun murder committed in 1972 (the judge of the first murder trial accepted a bribe to free Aleman). There are other myths, the review finds:

- The gangsters didn't kill each other as much as events such as the St. Valentine's Day Massacre of 1929 might indicate. In that mayhem, seven men from one gang were murdered at once. Of 729 gangland killings documented by the Chicago Crime Commission during Prohibition, 139 of the victims were gang members. Most of the rest were freelance bootleggers, business owners who resisted the Mob or innocent bystanders. And the gangsters didn't often use the Thompson submachine gun made famous by mobster movies.
- The Outfit "had no ability to deliver a significant number of votes" in the 1960 presidential election of John Kennedy, Lurigio and the University of Illinois' John Binder conclude, despite claims by Chicago mobster Sam Giancana. The only evidence of mobster-influenced voting patterns at the time show ballot-stuffing against a state's attorney who had raided gambling clubs and strip joints.
- Mafia movies to the contrary, Chicago's gangs can trace their origins to the machine politics of 19th-century U.S. cities, rather than Old World traditions from Sicily. Capone essentially accepted anyone as a gang member if they proved loyal. Criminologist Robert Lombardo of Loyola University-Chicago, documents decades of police efforts to arrest gangsters that were thwarted by elected officials, showing that widespread police corruption was possible only at the direction of

politicians, not crooked cops. Long tardy in their involvement, federal prosecutors finally broke the back of The Outfit with racketeering laws that started in the 1980s.

“Criminals gained not only wealth but political influence by fixing elections, placing favored candidates in office and fattening campaign coffers,” says Lurigio, who grew up in a syndicate-controlled neighborhood of the Windy City. Prohibition and its nationwide ban on booze, he says, was a law that was unique in its widespread loathing by the populace and that opening is what enabled organized crime to gain its political footing in Chicago.

“The U.S. prosecution effort against organized crime over the last 25 years is without precedent. Organized crime, especially Italian-American organized crime, has clearly been weakened. But as long as the demand for stolen property, sex, drugs, gambling and easy profits from fraud remain high, organized crime will never be eradicated,” says criminologist Jay Albanese of Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, who was not one of the review authors. U.S. corruption case numbers remain constant, he notes.

On movies and television, mobsters abound as seen in the popularity of HBO’s *The Sopranos* and *Boardwalk Empire*. But Lurigio says the days of Chicago’s homicidal racketeers are gone. He rejects drawing any equivalence between Prohibition and today’s war on drugs. “Street gangs involved in illicit drug sales are also marginalized and regarded as a dangerous element in communities,” he says.

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USA Today: <<https://eu.usatoday.com/story/tech/columnist/2013/06/08/capone-chicago-outfit-lessons/2397589/>>

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