

Beyond Goodfellas and The Godfather: the Cosa Nostra families' rise and fall

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Italian American organized crime may conjure images of classic gangster flicks, but as James B. Jacobs explores in the *Crime and Justice* article "The Rise and Fall of Organized Crime in the United States," its history is unexpectedly nuanced and mutable. The Cosa Nostra families—popularly known as the Mafia—operated, at the height of their power, in at least twenty-four American cities, with five in New York City alone. Although no national body governed the families, they operated similarly to one another and were major urban power brokers.

Before the 1970s, [organized crime](#) was largely ignored by J. Edgar Hoover's FBI, even though Cosa Nostra families had begun to traffic drugs and infiltrate unions as early as the 1910s, and Prohibition in particular (1919-1933) gave them the opportunity to control black markets. As times changed, they expanded their powers to run seedy coin-operated pornography films, finance the first large Las Vegas casino, and fix sports contests. It wasn't until the 1960s that Cosa Nostra began to face serious legal consequences. Congress enacted the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act in 1968 and followed up in 1970 with the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (RICO). When Hoover died in 1972, the FBI redefined its top priorities, and took on the Cosa Nostra families. By this time, Italian American organized [crime](#) was reaching its peak, thanks to labor and business racketeering, black markets like gambling and pornography, and drug trafficking. But in the 1980s and '90s, and into the current century, the [federal government](#) relentlessly pressured and prosecuted organized crime outfits, with dozens upon dozens of members and even bosses recanting

the Cosa Nostra code of silence known as omertá. With the federal government able to protect informants under 1970's Witness Security Program, streams of members and associates agreed to cooperate with prosecutors.

Jacobs details many aspects of organized crime and explains how political and social changes helped define paths to power—and how further political and [social changes](#) have eroded them. For instance, the [power](#) that [labor unions](#) held in the U.S. in the 1970s was substantial enough that by replacing union officers with Cosa Nostra family members and associates, an organized crime [family](#) could control which businesses could operate in certain sectors, designating who would win contracts. As corruption began to be rooted out of these unions, the Cosa Nostra families' powers shrank. Around the same time, most U.S. cities had working-class Italian American neighborhoods, including recent immigrants who were ripe for recruitment by the ruling crime families. With neighborhood boundaries shrinking, and Italian Americans assimilating into mainstream society, the recruitment pool shrank. More legislation, especially in New York City in the late '90s, allowed law enforcement to purge Cosa Nostra groups from the legitimate economy by, for instance, refusing to award government contracts to any group affiliated with organized crime.

Despite pressure from the legal and judicial systems and a rapidly changing world, Cosa Nostra families survive and operate, albeit as shadow of their former selves. But Jacobs cautions that Cosa Nostra has proved resilient for more than a century—and even if organized crime is down, it's not out.

More information: James B. Jacobs, *The Rise and Fall of Organized Crime in the United States*, *Crime and Justice* (2019). [DOI: 10.1086/706895](#)

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