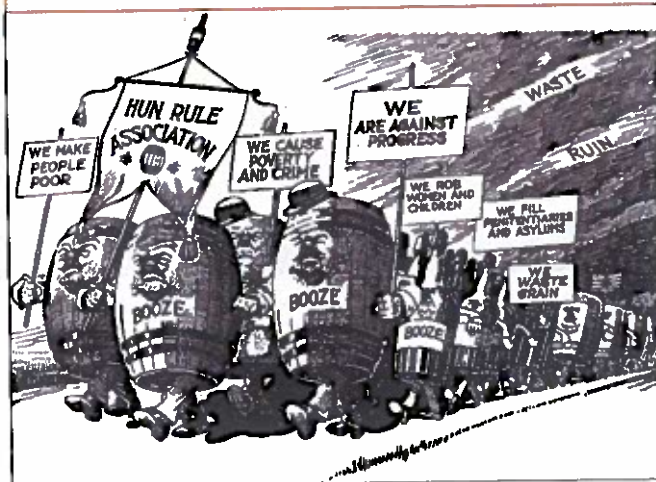


# What was Prohibition?

**Source C:** A cartoon published in a US newspaper during the First World War



## Prohibition terms

speakeasy	illegal drinking saloon
bootlegger	one who produced or sold alcohol illegally
bathub gin	home-brewed gin
still	a device for distilling alcohol
moonshine	illegally distilled or smuggled alcohol
rum runner	someone who illegally transports liquor across a border

At midnight on 16 January 1920, America introduced a new law. Seconds later, millions of people were breaking it. They would continue to break it until the law was repealed (ended) in 1933. Most of the lawbreakers would never get punished.

Some historians say that America's newest law was one of the country's biggest ever mistakes. So what law were people so keen to break? How did they break it? And why was it introduced in the first place?

**Prohibition**, as the new law was known, prohibited (banned) any American from selling, making or carrying around any drink containing more than 0.5% alcohol (most beers, for example, contain 5% alcohol). The ban on booze wasn't a sudden thing. For many years there had been a strong campaign against alcohol, led by pressure groups such as the **Anti-Saloon League**. Many Americans supported a ban, claiming that the 'demon drink' damaged family life and caused idleness, sickness and debt.

**Source A** ▾ From an American school textbook, written, not surprisingly, by a person in favour of Prohibition.

"A cat or dog can be killed if it drinks a small glass of beer. A boy once drank whiskey from a flask he had found and died the next day."

### FACT The law

Prohibition is actually a nickname. Officially, the ban on alcohol is the 18th Amendment [change] to the United States Constitution. The Amendment states that '... the manufacture, sale or transportation of intoxicating liquors ... within the United States ... for beverage purposes is hereby prohibited.' Interestingly, it was never illegal to buy or drink it! The **Volstead Act** later set down penalties for breaking the new law.

Prohibition never worked. The reason for this was quite simple – people still wanted to drink. They were prepared to break a law they never wanted ... and criminal gangs were only too willing to get the alcohol for them. These gangs ran illegal bars called **speakeasies**, which sold **bootleg** alcohol smuggled in from abroad by **bootleggers**. They also sold **moonshine** – a home-made spirit that was sometimes so strong it caused serious illness. In fact, deaths from alcohol poisoning went up from 98 in 1920 to nearly 800 in 1926! Speakeasies were hidden away in cellars or private hotel rooms and drinkers had to give passwords or knock on the door in code to gain entry.

**Source B** ▶ Advertising an illegal speakeasy in a newspaper or magazine was against the law. Instead, signs and directions were chalked onto the pavement to show the way.



## Overview: What were the effects of Prohibition?

**N**ATIONAL PROHIBITION CAME into force on 16 January 1920. It was now against the law to make, sell or transport alcoholic drinks in the USA.

Drinking became secretive and more expensive but it did not stop (consumption was not against the law). The rich had their supplies delivered to their homes. Others might visit a 'speakeasy' - a basement bar behind locked doors with peepholes. The '21 Club' was the speakeasy in New York for the members of high society. There were soon more speakeasies than pre-1919 saloons. By 1925 there were more than 15,000 in the city of Detroit; by 1929 there were 32,000 in New York.

### Bootleggers and smugglers

'BOOTLEGGERS' brought illegal liquor supplies into the cities: rum was smuggled from the West Indies, whisky crossed the river to Detroit from Canada. It was soon big business and big businessmen got involved. Joseph Kennedy, the father of the future president, made a great deal of the Kennedy fortune in the illegal liquor trade. Bootleggers organised themselves into gangs to transport the goods and these gangs became rich and powerful.

### Illegal liquor

By the late 1920s most alcohol was made at home in illegal 'stills'. It was known as 'moonshine'. Home-brewed 'bathtub' gin could be made drinkable by adding other ingredients to it. In 1930 282,122 illicit stills were seized by government agents. This home-made alcohol was often deadly and caused serious poisoning or blindness. Alcohol was still needed for some industrial processes and although the government deliberately added poison to industrial alcohol much of it went missing and was resold for drinking. Deaths from alcoholic poisoning went up from 98 in 1920 to 760 in 1926.

### Stopping the trade

The profits from bootlegging were so great that many people were willing to risk imprisonment. To stop the trade, the Prohibition Bureau employed between 1500 and 2300 agents for the whole of the USA, about 200,000 square miles each. They were badly paid and it soon became clear that something was wrong when it was discovered that some of them were being taken to work in chauffeur-driven cars. One in twelve agents were sacked for taking bribes. The choice for many agents was either taking a bribe, or being beaten up or murdered by

gangsters. However, there were some successful and famous agents such as Izzy Einstein, Moe Smith and Eliot Ness.

### Organised crime and corruption

There had been criminal gangs before Prohibition but now their activity and power increased. There were huge profits in booze. Gangsters were making about \$2 billion a year from it. Rival gangs fought each other to supply the speakeasies with illegal alcohol, hijacking each other's booze supplies and murdering the opposition. Police were bribed to turn a blind eye. Between 1926 and 1927 there were 130 gangland murders in Chicago, for which no one was ever convicted. By the end of the decade, only the most powerful gangs had survived. Cars and Thompson sub-machine guns helped gangsters to run their trade successfully across entire states. Increasingly, organised crime bought its way into government, businesses and trade unions.

One of the worst legacies of Prohibition was the level of corruption it introduced to American society. This included not only Prohibition agents and the police, but also judges and local and state government officials. The bribes were high, and some thought there was not much wrong with people having a drink. But once the bribes were taken, officials were in the pocket of the gangsters for good. This meant that other 'rackets' like protection and prostitution could be run without interference from the police and courts. Corruption extended to the federal government where even some of President Harding's advisers were involved. George Remus, the 'king of the bootleggers', paid thousands of dollars to top government officials for protection from prosecution.



**S**OURCE 1 Visiting a speakeasy during Prohibition



**SOURCE 2** An illegal alcohol still in the 1920s



**SOURCE 3** A woman shows how she carries her drink concealed in a special garment under her skirt. You could get gin by calling a telephone number and for \$2 a bottle it would be delivered



1. Make a list of the main consequences of Prohibition.
2. Do you think the supporters of Prohibition would have been pleased by these?
3. How did Prohibition encourage Americans to break the law?

**SOURCE 4** 'Two-gun' Hart was an extremely successful Prohibition agent who made numerous arrests in Montana. What was strange about Hart was that he was an Italian immigrant and the brother of gangster Al Capone. Hart was so successful that he was removed from his post. This was probably because he was damaging the business interests of powerful people who had links with the illegal liquor trade

**SOURCE 5** E. Mandeville, talking about Detroit in *Outlook Magazine*, 1925

*“ Ten years ago a dishonest policeman was a rarity . . . Now the honest ones are pointed out as rarities . . . Their relationship with the bootleggers is perfectly friendly. They have to pinch two out of five once in a while, but they choose the ones who are least willing to pay the bribes. ”*

**SOURCE 7** A witness to the Wickersham Commission, 1930, set up to investigate the effects of Prohibition

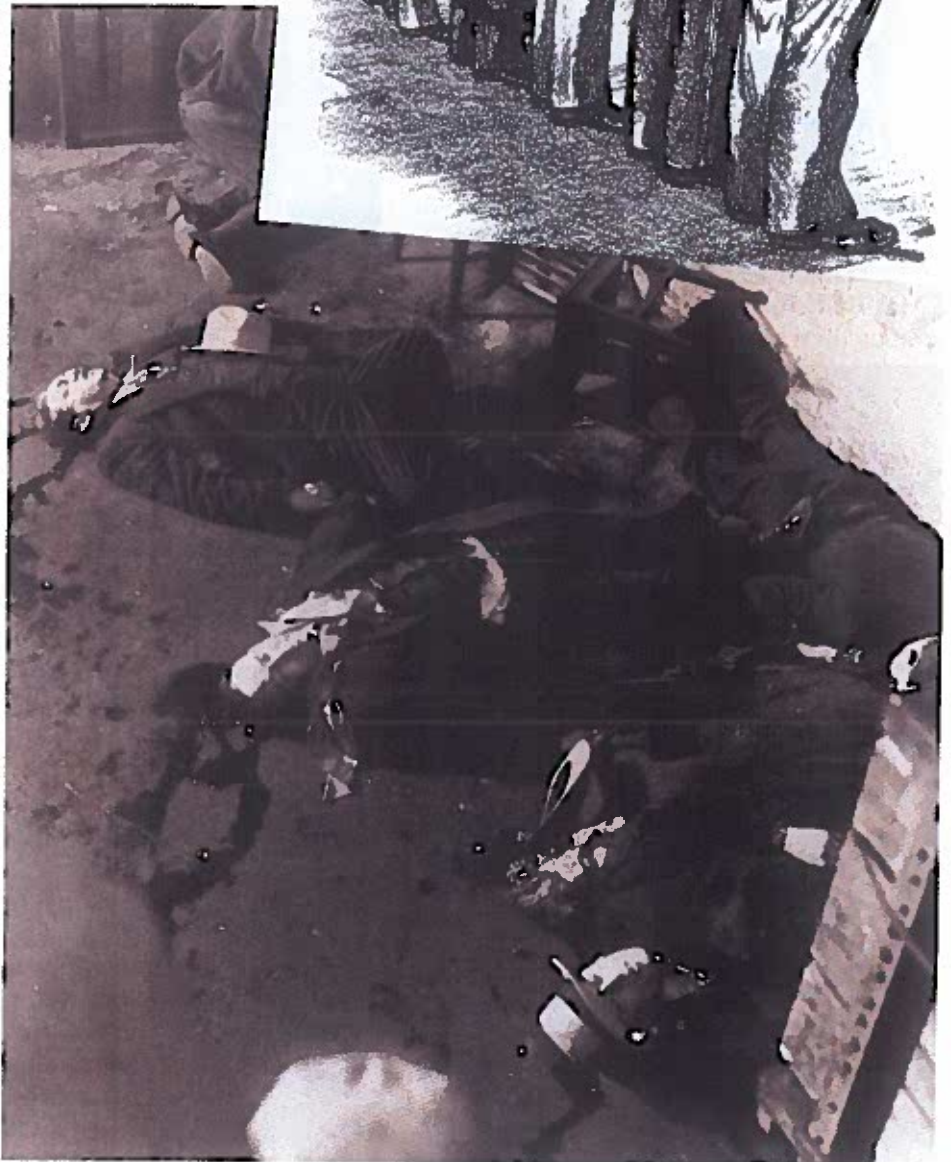
*“ Today there is not any feeling of resentment against them [the racketeers] because they are looked upon as being part of a trade to satisfy a social want . . . The people want their liquor. They do not care what chances the other fellow takes so long as they don't take the chance. ”*

**SOURCE 8** Elmer Gertz, a Chicago lawyer in the 1920s

*“ You'd go into what seemed to be an ordinary restaurant that served fried chicken and spaghetti. The wine would be served in coffee cups so that if the police raided the place, you'd appear to be drinking coffee, not wine . . .*

*Prohibition taught America disrespect for the law. It taught many people that the pursuit of crime created very profitable careers . . . most people felt there was nothing wrong, particularly when they knew the President was serving liquor in the White House. ”*

**SOURCE 6 A** Cartoon from the Prohibition era entitled 'The National Gesture'



**SOURCE 9** Victims of the St Valentine's Day Massacre, 1929. The most horrific example of inter-gang violence was this massacre in which seven members of a gang were gunned down by rivals in a garage. This was a turning point. People were finally shocked into action. There were mounting calls for Prohibition to be ended because it was causing so much gang violence

# Extension materials

## What were the effects of prohibition?

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### 1 More alcohol was drunk

Once alcohol was banned it actually became more attractive to people. Many people ignored the law and illegal bars, known as 'speakeasies', opened in their thousands.

The amount of alcohol people drank went up. Alcohol was still easy to obtain:

- **Moonshine** Many people made their own alcohol, which was known as 'moonshine'. Much of it was poisonous and many people died from drinking it. Government prohibition agents tried to stop the production of moonshine, but there were so many illegal breweries and distilleries they had an impossible job.
- **Smuggling** Smugglers brought alcohol into the USA from Canada and the West Indies. In four years one smuggler, William McCoy, smuggled \$70 million worth of whisky into the USA.

### 2 Organised crime

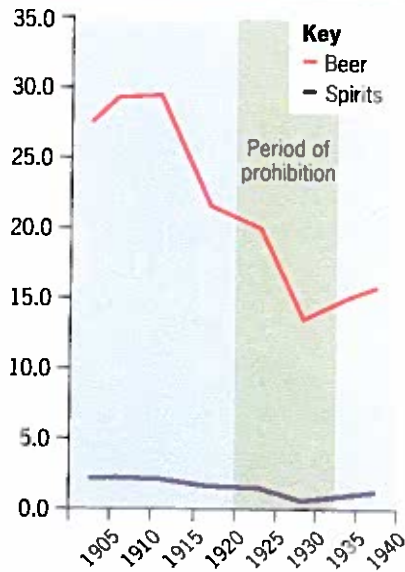
Gangsters controlled the speakeasies. They made huge profits from the sale of illegal alcohol.

The gangsters bribed judges, politicians and the police into turning a blind eye. This meant that gangsters, such as Al Capone, could operate without fear of being arrested.

Rivalry between the many gangs led to violence in cities such as Chicago. Between 1927 and 1931 over 200 gangsters were murdered in Chicago. No-one was arrested for these crimes!

	1921	1925	1929
Illegal distilleries seized	9,746	12,023	15,794
Gallons of distilled spirits seized	414,000	1,103,000	1,186,000
Number of arrests	34,175	62,747	66,878

**SOURCE 58**



Average alcohol consumption (in US gallons) per year of Americans, 1905–40.

**How was prohibition enforced?**

**SOURCE 59**

	1921	1925	1929
<i>Illegal distilleries seized</i>	9,746	12,023	15,794
<i>Gallons (US) of spirit seized</i>	414,000	11,030,000	11,860,000
<i>Arrests</i>	34,175	62,747	66,878

Activities of federal prohibition agents.

Prohibition lasted from 1920 until 1933. It is often said that prohibition was a total failure. This is not entirely correct. Levels of alcohol consumption fell by about 30 per cent in the early 1920s (see Source 58). Prohibition gained widespread approval in some states, particularly the rural areas in the mid-west, although in urban states it was not popular (Maryland never even introduced prohibition). The government ran information campaigns and prohibition agents arrested offenders (see Source 59). Two of the most famous agents were Isadore Einstein and his deputy Moe Smith. They made 4392 arrests. Their raids were always low key. They would enter speakeasies (illegal bars) and simply order a drink. Einstein had a special flask hidden inside his waistcoat with a funnel attached. He preserved the evidence by pouring his drink down the funnel and the criminals were caught!

**SOURCE 60**



Alcohol being tipped down the drain. Vast quantities of bootleg (illegal) liquor were seized, but were only a fraction of the total.

**SOURCE 61**



Prohibition agents Isadore Einstein and Moe Smith (usually known as Izzy and Moe). They were so successful that speakeasies actually put up posters warning people to watch out for these men.

**Supply and demand**

Despite the work of the agents, prohibition proved impossible to enforce effectively in the cities. Enforcement was underfinanced. There were not enough agents – each agent was poorly paid and was responsible for a huge area. By far the biggest drawback was that millions of Americans, particularly in urban areas, were simply not prepared to obey this law. So bootleggers (suppliers of illegal alcohol) made vast fortunes. Al Capone (see page 209) made around \$60 million a year from his speakeasies. His view was that 'Prohibition is a business. All I do is supply a public demand.' And the demand was huge. By 1925 there were more speakeasies in American cities than there had been saloons in 1919. Izzy Einstein filed a report to his superiors on how easy it was to find alcohol after arriving in a new city. Here are the results:

- Chicago: 21 minutes
- Atlanta: 17 minutes
- Pittsburg: 11 minutes
- New Orleans: 35 seconds (he was offered a bottle of whisky by his taxi driver when he asked where he could get a drink!)

Which of Sources 58–61 is the most useful to the historian, or are they more useful when taken together? Explain your answer. Is it possible to enforce any law when the population refuses to obey it? Try to think of laws that affect you today.



A visit to a speakeasy.

SOURCE 64

*Statistics in the Detroit police court of 1924 show 7,391 arrests for violations of the prohibition law, but only 458 convictions. Ten years ago a dishonest policeman was a rarity . . . Now the honest ones are pointed out as rarities . . . Their relationship with the bootleggers is perfectly friendly. They have to pinch two out of five once in a while, but they choose the ones who are least willing to pay bribes.*

E Mandeville, in *Outlook* magazine, 1925.

- 1 Read Source 64. How has prohibition affected the police in Detroit?

SOURCE 65



'The National Gesture': a cartoon from the prohibition era.



An illegal still.

Illegal stills (short for distilleries) sprang up all over the USA as people made their own illegal whisky – moonshine. The stills were a major fire hazard and the alcohol they produced was frequently poisonous. Agents seized over 280,000 of these stills, but we have no clear way of knowing how many were not seized. Most Americans had no need for their own still. They simply went to their favourite speakeasy. The speakeasies were well supplied by bootleggers. About two-thirds of the illegal alcohol came from Canada. The vast border between the USA and Canada was virtually impossible to patrol. Other bootleggers brought in alcohol by sea. They would simply wait in the waters outside US control until an opportunity to land their cargo presented itself. One of the most famous was Captain McCoy, who specialised in the finest Scotch whisky. This is where the phrase 'the real McCoy' comes from.

**Corruption**

Prohibition led to massive corruption. Many of the law enforcement officers were themselves involved with the liquor trade. Big breweries stayed in business throughout the prohibition era. This is not an easy business to hide! But the breweries stayed in operation by bribing local government officials, prohibition agents and the police to leave them alone.

In some cities, police officers were quite prepared to direct people to speakeasies. Even when arrests were made, it was difficult to get convictions because more senior officers or even judges were in the pay of the criminals. One in 12 prohibition agents was dismissed for corruption. The New York FBI boss, Don Chaplin, once ordered his 200 agents: 'Put your hands on the table, both of them. Every son of a bitch wearing a diamond is fired.'