

Did Gangster Al Capone Serve a Social Good?

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Chicago's Al Capone is perhaps America's best known gangster from the 1920s' Prohibition era. And his notoriety, like that of other public enemies, has been shaped by movies, TV and radio. But what is real about a gangster such as Capone and what is myth?



Martha Huggins, sociology professor, teaches "Gangsters, Gangs and Organized Crime," a course examining the underlying social meaning of criminal and antiestablishment groups. (Photo illustration by Tracey O'Donnell)

In the course "Gangsters, Gangs and Organized Crime," Martha [Huggins](#), professor of sociology, encourages her students to explore the underlying social meaning behind prevalent images of gangs and gangsters.

"We find from research that the media overemphasize certain aspects of gangs and gangsters such as violence," says Huggins, who holds the Charles A. and Leo M. Favrot Chair of Human Relations. "If your opinion is shaped by movies, television and newspapers, then you are going to think that gangs are always involved in violence and always looking for a rumble."

And while movies often depict crime as glamorous, "what usually happens in the end is that the bad guy dies," says Huggins.

The course focuses on 1920s and 1930s-era gangsters but also looks at contemporary gangs in Los Angeles and Latin America.

The social theorist Emile Durkheim has stated that even criminality contributes to the functioning of society. Durkheim suggests that gangs, by exhibiting inappropriate or deviant behavior, help define the boundaries of a "good" society.

In addition, "without gangs and violence, some arms of law enforcement might go extinct," Huggins says.

Conformity and criminality are linked, she says, and there are interrelationships between gangs and communities.

Gangs sometimes provide social services to the community, and the community provides services in return. This reciprocity is especially true in Los Angeles and Chicago, as well as in Latin America, says Huggins.

As an example, she says, "Gangs might provide security from competing gangs while the community might help to hide the gangs during police raids or by not testifying or calling tip lines."