



# Will this ‘thing’ Ever Really Come to an End? Reviewing US v. Aiello et al., an FBI-Lead Star-Studded La Cosa Nostra Case

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COMMENTARIES

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## ABSTRACT

Criminal proceedings against America’s La Cosa Nostra dominated headlines and captured the public’s attention in the late 80’s and early 90s. However, they have all but disappeared from scene, with many declaring La Cosa Nostra to a ‘thing’ of the past. This commentary reviews the case US v. Aiello et al., an FBI lead indictment into a multi-year, multi-million-dollar fraud scheme carried out against participants in illegal gambling, specifically, *backroom* poker games. Of interest, the fraud was supported by advanced digital technologies and the cooperation of La Cosa Nostra – seemingly contradictory phenomena. The events of US v. Aiello et al. recount a noteworthy resilience, continuity, and, simultaneously, evolution in the five families’ activities and modi operandi. In particular, the following questions are addressed: is La Cosa Nostra returning to the crime scene, in what form, and in cooperation with whom.

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In 1999, the pilot for David Chase's *The Sopranos* debuted with the plea of its anti-hero, explaining the ill fortune of being a La Cosa Nostra (LCN) member at the turn of the century: 'It's good to be in something from the ground floor, and I came too late for that, I know. But lately I've been getting a feeling that I came at the end. The best is over.'<sup>1</sup> Twenty-six years on, we find ourselves asking, will this 'thing' ever really come to an end? In October 2025, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) unsealed an indictment, *United States (US) v Aiello et al.*,<sup>2</sup> levied against 31 individuals for their involvement in a fraud scheme executed amongst broader illegal gambling operations. The case, packed with NBA stars, luxury Manhattan properties, millions of US dollars, and Italian-American Mafiosi, reads as if an excerpt from Giuliani and Webster's Commission Case of the late-80s, but this sense of nostalgia (perhaps better termed as *deja-vu*) comes to a screeching halt when one encounters the arsenal of digital technology involved.

Between 2019–2025, within underground gambling rooms, poker games were arranged to fraud wealthy victims, enticed to participate by the opportunity to gamble alongside their sporting idols. Unbeknownst to them, the tables were *rigged* – literally the tables. Equipped with X-ray technology, specialised contact lenses, card-reading deck-shufflers, and coordinated opponents – privy to the hand of the victim – \$7.1 million was captured. This scheme was elaborately orchestrated and replicated across the United States, from the Hamptons and Miami, to the usual culprit Las Vegas. But it was in the New York brownstone of 80 Washington Place<sup>3</sup> where the usual suspects entered the picture. Bonanno, Gambino, Lucchese, and Genovese, now household names, got their proverbial slice of the pie in this high-tech fraud. Though high-tech and LCN seem antonyms, consider, LCN is the same criminal organisation that struggled to migrant away from standard telephone landlines, despite being continually tapped by police investigators. Indeed, LCN is increasingly associated with an aging lot of criminals on their way out the door – at least according to prevailing media coverage.

In this paper, we will explore the specifics of *US v. Aiello et al.*, exploring the different actors involved, the criminal charges they face, and what broader lessons can be learned from this indictment, regarding the contemporary activities of LCN and their noteworthy resilience in the ever-changing world of organised crime.

## THE RIGGED-POKER SCHEME

Within the operation of what the FBI referred to as *straight*, but nonetheless illegal, poker games (wherein the players genuinely gambled against one another), specific tables were designed for the sole intention of defrauding victims. At a *rigged* table, the victim believed they were competing against all other players, how poker is normally played, but in reality, they were the only one gambling. The other players, instead, were in coordination, members of a *cheating team*. Technological tools, varying by instance, were employed by said cheating teams to ensure they were aware of the cards dealt to the victims. Beginning with the shuffle, the machine employed to distribute and mix the deck of cards was equipped as to read and communicate, wirelessly, to an off-site *operator* the hands dealt. The operator then passed the information via cell phone on to the *quarterback*, a player seated at the table and responsible for directing the remaining cheating team members. Through a series of secret signals, the cheating team coordinated their in-game decisions; including losing several hands to lure the victims into the false sense that the game was real.<sup>4</sup> Other technology was employed to further strengthen the cheating teams' position against the victims', including electronic poker chip trays, where players often place their cards (facedown), and decoy cell phones, both able to

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1 David Chase, 'The Sopranos: Pilot' (HBO, 10 January 1999).

2 *United States v. Aiello et al*, No. 1:25-cr-00314-JMA-CHK (Eastern District of New York, October 9 2025) (Indictment).

3 Katherine Donlevy, 'Luxury Greenwich Village pad used in NBA poker scandal hit with dozens of 311 complaints before massive bust' (New York Post 25 October 2025) <<https://nypost.com/2025/10/25/us-news/dozens-of-311-complaints-lodged-against-home-of-nba-poker-scandal/>> accessed 27 October 2025.

4 Alaa Elassar 'Barcoded decks, contact lenses and X-ray tables: How New York's mafia allegedly ran illegal poker games tied to US athletes' (CNN, 24 October 2025) <<https://edition.cnn.com/2025/10/24/us/mafia-la-cosa-nostra-nba-sports-gambling-probe>> accessed 27 October 2025.

read the hidden cards' values. Alternatively, cards were invisibly marked, discernible only to those wearing modified sunglasses or specially designed contact lenses.<sup>5</sup>

Aiello et al., places a significant share of these rigged games as having happened at two weekly-occurring straight games, *the Washington Place Game* and *the Lexington Avenue Game*. Though on several occasions, games were hosted in other locations, including Las Vegas, East Hampton, and Miami. The weekly games, based in New York, were operated under the consent and oversight of LCN, with the Washington Place event falling under the jurisdiction of the Gambino family and Lexington Avenue subjected to the Bonanno family. The usage of straight games, especially those governed by LCN, was likely part of the orchestrators' efforts to entice their wealthy victims to the table, temptation reinforced with the use of *face cards*. Face cards, assumingly a reference to the most important cards in the game of poker, were former and current professional athletes who participated as members of the cheating teams; paid part of the proceeds in return for their cooperation. As recognisable persons, celebrities in their own right, they provided an additional sense of legitimacy to the rigged table and offered victims an incentive to join. Indeed, reports emerging since the unsealing of the indictment describe a victim having been "so star-struck... it's like he wanted to give [the face card] his money."<sup>6</sup>

However, for those less-than-willing to part with their money (after it had been lost), LCN provided arguably their most well-known service, debt-collection by threat and force. Payments from victims and general proceeds from the activities were then laundered by another crime-as-a-service provider. A professional money launderer cleaned the money, sometimes using shell companies as intermediaries, and issued it back to LCN and the scheme's orchestrators as cryptocurrency, cash, or other alternative methods.<sup>7</sup>

## AUTHORS & VICTIMS

The indictment provides little clarification regarding who these star-struck victims were. Though it does contextualise that they were wealthy, sometimes well-known, persons. The losses they incurred ranged from meaningful amounts such as \$50,000 or \$100,000, to quite significant frauds, with a victim being scammed of \$1.8 million in a single session of the Lexington Avenue Game.

As for the cheating teams, they were comprised of a mix of face cards and LCN-affiliated persons. Face cards mentioned in the indictment are Damon Jones and Chauncy Billups. Mr. Jones, a so-called journeyman, played for several NBA franchises from 1997 until 2012, with his playing career ultimately culminating in brief oversea (Italy, Venezuela, Puerto Rico) and minor league stints. Mr. Billups, on the other hand, was (until the unsealing of Aiello et al.) the head coach of the NBA's Portland Trailblazers, a 5-time league all-star, one-time champion, and member of the hall of fame. Sophia Wei, Horatio Hu, Nelson Alvarez, Kenny Han, Jamie Gilet, Marco Garzon, Eric Earnest, Michael Renzulli, and John Mazzola, are described as being cheating team members and have no specified tie to LCN according to the facts presented by the indictment.

The FBI pins the organizing role onto Saul Becher, Ammar Awawdeh, Zhen Hu, Robert Stroud, John Gallo, and Seth Trustman. Mr. Awawdeh and Mr. Trustman are identified as being connected to LCN, the former a Gambino associate whilst the latter a Lucchese associate, just as well as Mr. Gallo, a full-fledged member of the Gambino's. References to persons as being associated to LCN confers a regularity to their cooperation and involvement with a given crime family, despite no formal membership, usually due to their lack of Italian-ancestry. Given the facts of the case, they appear to have been key actors for the organization of the Washington Place and Lexington Avenue games. Mr. Hu, likewise, is identified as an organizer of the Lexington Avenue game, though without any specification of being an associate of LCN.

Mr. Stroud is referenced in the indictment as the provider of technology on several occasions – alongside Tony Goodson, Shane Hennen, and Curtis Meeks. Mr. Meeks' role appears to have been

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5 *United States v. Aiello et al*, No. 1:25-cr-00314-JMA-CHK (EDNY, October 9 2025) (Indictment).

6 Elassar, 'Barcoded decks, contact lenses, and X-ray tables' (CNN, 24 October 2025).

7 United States Attorney's Office Eastern District of New York, '31 Defendants, Including Members and Associates of Organized Crime Families and National Basketball Association Coach Chauncey Billups, Charged in Schemes to Rig Illegal Poker Games' (*United States Attorney's Office Eastern District of New York*, 23 October 2025) <<https://www.justice.gov/usao-edny/pr/31-defendants-including-members-and-associates-organized-crime-families-and-national>> accessed 25 October 2025.

limited to that of a technology provider, whereas Mr. Goodson also partook as a cheating team member, and Mr. Hennen and Mr. Stroud as organizers of rigged games outside LCN’s regular straight games. Mr. Hennen currently operates social media pages where he is considered a *bet-influencer* providing suggestions to his audience on how to wager their money. Mr. Hennen, as well as several others charged in Aiello et al., was also named in the indictment released alongside, US v. Earnest et al., for interfering in professional sporting events and gambling with undue insider knowledge.<sup>8</sup>

As for LCN, 10 members are named in the indictment. Ernest Aiello, Julius Ziliani, Thomas Gelardo from the Bonanno family; John Gallo, Lee Fama, Joseph Lanni, Angelo Ruggiero Jr. from the Gambino family, and Mathew Daddino from the Genovese family received the proceeds on behalf of their crime organisations. Mr. Gelardo and Mr. Ziliani are accused of partaking in acts of violence and extortion, alongside LCN-associates Mr. Trustman, Mr. Awawdeh, and Nicholas Minucci (a Gambino associate), cheating team member Mr. Mazzola, an organiser in Mr. Becher, and Lexington Avenue Game’s *security guard* Osman Hoti. Beyond debt-collections, several of the aforementioned persons carried out a robbery at gun-point of an un-named co-conspirator to acquire an additional rigged shuffling machine for use in the scheme. Anthony Shnayderman is named as the lone money launderer in the indictment, though there appears to be reference to him having unnamed *associates*.

## CRIMINAL ACTS & CHARGES FACED

The involved face a range of criminal charges under the American Title 18, United States Code (USC). The first count of wire fraud includes all 31 persons, clearing delineating the varying crimes committed as all being components within a grander scheme to defraud the victims.<sup>9</sup> The charge of money laundering conspiracy,<sup>10</sup> instead, is levelled against a subset of actors – with the higher profile LCN figures omitted (e.g., Mr. Aiello – by some accounts the Bonanno’s acting consigliere, or Mr. Lanni a Gambino Captain/Capo) – arguably reflecting their lack of direct involvement in the day-to-day of the fraud. Counts two and three,<sup>11</sup> likewise, target only the specific persons connected to the operation of the Lexington Avenue and Washington Place games, respectively, and counts five through seven, persons engaged in specific acts of violent extortion.<sup>12</sup> Table 1 summarises the charges faced by the indicted.

STATUTE	CRIME/PURPOSE
T. 18 USC §1955(a)	Operation of illegal gambling business
T. 18 USC §1951(a)	Hobbs Act: interference with commerce by robbery or extortion
T. 18 USC §1349	Attempt or conspiracy to commit wire fraud
T. 18 USC §1956(h)	Conspiracy to commit money laundering
T. 18 USC §2	Aiding and abetting federal crimes
T. 18 USC §924(d)(1)	Forfeiture of firearms involved in federal crimes
T. 18 USC §981(a)(1)(C)	Forfeiture of property connected to fraud or certain crimes
T. 18 USC §982(a)(1)	Forfeiture of property involved in money laundering
T. 18 USC §982(b)(1)	
T. 18 USC §1955(d)	Forfeiture of property for illegal gambling
T. 18 USC §3551 et seq.	Federal sentencing guidelines
T. 21 USC §853(p)	Substitute asset forfeiture (when criminal assets are missing)
T. 28 USC §2461(C)	Civil forfeiture authorisation

**Table 1** Criminal Statutes & Forfeiture Allegations in U.S. v. Aiello et al.

8 *United States v. Earnest et al.*, No. 25-cr-323 (EDNY, 16 October 2025) (Indictment); *United States v. Aiello et al.*, No. 1:25-cr-00314-JMA-CHK (EDNY, October 9 2025) (Indictment); David Chang and Ali Ingersol ‘Former Philly resident named in illegal NBA betting, rigged poker game indictments’ (*NBC10 Philadelphia*, 23 October 2025). <<https://www.nbcphiladelphia.com/news/local/philadelphia-illegal-nba-sports-betting-poker-games-terry-rozier-chauncey-billups-indictment-fbi-mafia/4290641/>> accessed 26 October 2025.

9 T. 18 USC §1343, §1349.

10 T. 18 USC §1956(h); 1956(a)(1)(B)(i); §1957(a).

11 New York Penal Law §225.5; §20.00; T. 18 U.S.C. §1955(a).

12 T. 18 USC §1951(a), 2.

Those charged with the running of illegal gambling operations face a relatively modest sentence of not more than 5 years (as well as potential financial penalties), whilst the extortion, wire fraud, and money laundering prosecutions bring with them heavier sentencing guidelines, up to 20 years for the former two and 22 years for the latter. All persons also face criminal forfeiture allegations for the proceeds collected through their criminal activities.<sup>13</sup>

## ‘HISTORY DOESN’T REPEAT ITSELF, BUT IT OFTEN RHYMES’

In analysing this indictment, we – as criminologists familiar with organised crime – experience mixed and sometimes contradictory reactions, together with several open questions. The first concerns whether LCN families are returning to the crime scene. The second asks how they are returning and, the third, in cooperation with whom.

The major LCN families were largely dismantled by the FBI during the 1990s — more than a generation ago. The last bosses of the five families died either in prison or in exile. Many of their children and relatives moved into legitimate business activities, leaving illicit markets in New York and other major U.S. cities open to Dominican, Vietnamese, and other ethnic criminal groups that filled the vacuum. This is the official version and the interpretation supported by several analyses.<sup>14</sup> Yet, as *U.S. v. Aiello et al.* indicates, the story may be more complex.

Indictments of LCN members have continued to appear, revealing a pattern of adaptive transformation rather than disappearance. These newer actors have tended to play a less prominent but still strategic role: moving opportunistically, leveraging their reputational capital, and cooperating with newcomers in the drug trade – sometimes at the international level – while maintaining selective ties with partners in Italy and elsewhere whenever advantageous. In short, contemporary LCN affiliates have shifted fluidly between criminal and legal markets, generating substantial profits while attracting less law-enforcement attention and lower penalties than in the 1980s and 1990s. Consider, Steven Mazzone, the under-boss of the Philadelphia family, received just a 5-year sentence for loan-sharking and illegal gambling, despite it being his second time through the courts for racketeering offenses.<sup>15</sup>

Rather than cohesive families – which suggest hierarchy and monopoly – we now see organised criminals who employ the brand and know-how of the traditional families while diversifying into new criminal and legitimate enterprises. They operate differently from their fathers, with lower profiles and more flexible strategies. LCN’s activities are no longer limited to the physical sphere, though LCN indictments still frequently mention backrooms in restaurants and suspiciously named coffee shops, for example, West Babylon’s Centro Calcio Italiano Club, there’s now talk of online gambling websites and *off-shore* internet servers.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, as witnessed in *US v. Aiello et al.*, money laundering is increasingly sophisticated, with shell companies and infiltrated firms defining the cleaning process.<sup>17</sup>

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13 T. 18 USC §982(a)(1); §981(a)(1)(C); §924(d)(1); T. 28 USC §2461(c); T. 21 USC §853(p).

14 See, e.g., Peter Reuter, ‘The Decline of the American Mafia’ (1995) Summer (120) National Affairs: Public Interest <[https://www.nationalaffairs.com/public\\_interest/detail/the-decline-of-the-american-mafia](https://www.nationalaffairs.com/public_interest/detail/the-decline-of-the-american-mafia)> accessed 3 November 2025.

15 *United States v. Mazzone et al*, No. 2:19-cr-00071-RBS (Eastern District of Pennsylvania, 11 November 2020) (Indictment); United States Department of Justice, ‘Underboss of the Philadelphia Mafia Sentenced for Leading Racketeering Conspiracy Engaged in Loansharking, Gambling, and Extortion,’ (United States Department of Justice, 15 December 2022) <<https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/pr/underboss-philadelphia-mafia-sentenced-leading-racketeering-conspiracy-engaged-loansharking>> accessed 30 October 2025.

16 *The People of the State of New York -against- Laforte et al.*, No. -2024 (Supreme Court of the State of New York County of Richmond, May 2024) (Indictment); *United States v. Villani*, No. 1:22-cr-00405 (EDNY, 8 September 2022) (Indictment); *United States v. Messina et al.*, No. 1:22-cr-00212-JGK (Southern District of New York, 28 July 2022) (Indictment); State of New Jersey, Office of the Attorney General, Division of Criminal Justice, and New Jersey State Police, ‘AG Platkin Announces Charges Against 39 Defendants – Including Members and Associates of the Lucchese Crime Family – for Racketeering, Gambling, Money Laundering, and Other Offenses’ (Matthew J. Pitkin Attorney General, 11 April 2025) <<https://www.njoag.gov/ag-platkin-announces-charges-against-39-defendants-including-members-and-associates-of-the-lucchese-crime-family-for-racketeering-gambling-money-laundering-and-other-offenses/>> accessed 30 October 2025; United States Attorney’s Office, ‘Nine Members and Associates of Genovese and Bonanno Organized Crime Families Charged with Racketeering and Illegal Gambling Offenses’ (United States Attorney’s Office Eastern District of New York, 16 August 2022) <<https://www.justice.gov/usao-edny/pr/nine-members-and-associated-genovese-and-bonanno-organized-crime-families-charged>> accessed 30 October 2025.

17 NJ, AG, DCJ and NJSP, ‘Charges Against 39 Defendants’ (Matthew J. Pitkin Attorney General, 11 April 2025); *United States v. Aiello et al*, No. 1:25-cr-00314-JMA-CHK (EDNY, October 9 2025) (Indictment).

Indeed, the docket of LCN cases filed in the last decade can be rather *repetitive*, with clear trends emerging. Earlier in 2025, 39 were arrested on the other side of the Hudson, where Lucchese members were extracting rents generated from online gambling sites and four backroom poker clubs in New Jersey.<sup>18</sup> Just as well, two 2022 indictments in connection with sports betting websites, involving a Genovese captain and Bonanno soldier, show the primacy of online activities; with the former having operated the service for more than a decade (and an estimated yearly take-home of \$1 million) before police intervention.

These indictments, particularly *US v. Aiello et al.*, illustrate a different kind of continuity for LCN, at least in New York. This continuity rests primarily on two elements that are deeply rooted in LCN tradition: gambling and extortion. The gambling business – historically linked to Atlantic City from the 1960s through the 1990s – represents a long-standing bridge between illegal and legal markets. Extortion has an even longer lineage. It was the preferred *technique* of early Italian migrants against both Italians and non-Italians at the start of the twentieth century and remains today the persuasive brand through which operations such as the *Rigged Poker Scheme* ensure payment from reluctant or defrauded players.

A third notable element emerging from this indictment is the innovative use of technology, which requires the participation of actors not necessarily belonging to LCN. This may indicate that the descendants of the five families have learned an important lesson: the same technology that once exposed their fathers through FBI-intercepts can now be used to enhance profit and criminal efficiency.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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