At the end of the twentieth century the revival in state policies regarding the concept of ‘community’ is remarkable. Since the 1960s we have seen a growing trend towards the individualisation of culture, fragmentation of morals and the globalisation of political economies. As early as the 1930s the German sociologist Tönnis described and predicted the development of societies from a Gemeinschaft to a Gesellschaft. During the 1970s ‘the community’ was synonymous with a sort of old-fashioned common-sense way of looking at social life. More recently, western societies have shown a new interest, however, in communities as viable entities, which are not only important for people but also provide a focal point towards which politicians can direct their actions.

In the case of criminal justice and social policy there seems to be an extra reason for this orientation towards the community. The levels of safety and crime in different neighbourhoods vary considerably, and a high level of either safety or crime greatly influences the quality of life experienced. And there is massive evidence that there is a strong correlation between crime and other indicators as regards the quality of a neighbourhood. As far as the work of the Chicago-school in the first decades of the century is concerned, the science of criminology has always had a strong interest in community life and development of neighbourhoods. In this issue the relation between communities and crime is described from different perspectives.

The first article concerns the rate of violent crime which varies dramatically between different cities. Within cities, there exist enormous differences in violent crime between neighbourhoods. The potential value of comparative studies lies in the possibility of assessing the relative importance of different layers of social processes (e.g. individual, parochial, urban, national) for understanding violence. In addition the determinants of the ecology of violent crime can be compared. Manuel Eisner and Per-Olof Wikström report some preliminary findings on a comparative study of police recorded violent crimes in Stockholm and Basel. Both cities share important economic and social characteristics like a high average level of income, a high percentage of workplaces in the service sector, a considerable immigrant population and a large surrounding metropolitan area. Yet there are also important differences, for example, violent crime seems to be more highly concentrated during weekend nights in Stockholm than in Basel and the presence of weapons in a community increases the risk of more serious outcomes of violent events. Offenders in both cities are highly concentrated in socially disorganised communities with few economic and social resources.

How can communities implement comprehensive prevention strategies whose components complement each other and achieve synergistic effects? J. David Hawkins presents in his article the concept of Communities that Care (CTC). The framework used is the social development model (SDM). Consistent with recent research, the SDM hypothesises that strong bonds to school, family and community serve as protective factors against behaviour that violates socially accepted behavioural standards. CTC guides communities, helping them to organise and operate effectively in order to promote positive social development in young people and prevent youth crime. CTC allows those who use it to select preventive policies, actions and programmes that best address the unique risk and protection profile of their community. The CTC strategy for community prevention has been implemented in over 500 communities across the United States in the past decade. In the United Kingdom, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has provided funding to establish CTC-UK. In the Netherlands the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Health, Welfare, and Sport are collaborating to provide funding to translate and adapt CTC for the Netherlands and to install and test CTC in four pilot communities.

Per-Olof Wikström and Marie Torstensson give a summary of the work they carried out for the Swedish Government. The purpose of the study was to outline the ‘best’ organisation and direction for developing local crime prevention and its national support. Although the problems dealt with and the suggestions put forward in this article are primarily based on Swedish conditions and experiences, they do believe that it has a more general application. It is all too evident for even the most causal observer of the international literature on crime prevention that the problems and prospects facing crime prevention share many universal characteristics. The ‘ideal’ crime-prevention programme should
encompass: early social prevention, later-stage social prevention, early situational prevention, general situational prevention, and programmes for chronic criminals. The authors clarify each of these premises.

*Bram Peper and Frans Spierings* discuss recent experiments with community mediation in the Netherlands. Community mediation is a form of mediation especially designed for neighbours (and other community members) to resolve their mutual conflicts *outside the legal system and inside the local community*. Conflicts between neighbours often involve ongoing struggles stretching over a long period. They typically begin with a life style difference, often merge with class and/or race differences, and escalate over time through a series of acts of annoyance and mutual retaliation. In the early 1970s, the founding of the San Francisco Community Boards (SFCB) shaped the idea of community mediation. In 1996-1997 three experimental projects were initiated in the Netherlands, aimed at conflict mediation at the local community level (in Rotterdam, Zwolle and Gouda). In the last two years two models have developed: a neighbourhood model, and a city model. The article presents some findings of an evaluation study on the projects.

Advocates of the ‘community’ concept assume that there is a relationship between a lack of ‘community’ and the existence of high levels of crime. These issues are discussed in *Adam Crawford’s* article. Disorganised communities are associated with high levels of crime and, inversely, low crime areas are associated with well-organised and cohesive communities. Yet, ‘community’ is not synonymous with social order. There is much criminological evidence to suggest that ‘organised communities’ can be crimogenic, such as criminal gangs, football hooligans and deviant subcultures. In the quest for a more socially just public sphere, community safety and restorative justice have a significant, yet limited, contribution to make. In so doing, we need to be aware of both the dangers and virtues of ‘community’. In many senses, the article is a plea for a more subtle understanding of the limitations of communities, both in community safety and restorative justice, and of the ways in which appeals to community often misunderstand community dynamics, as well as the ways in which these connect with wider socio-economic changes and political discourses.

*Martin Killias and Jacob Elfinus Sahetapy* discuss the concept of ‘community’ from a different angle. People may feel restrained not by neighbours, but the consequences of their deeds on persons they are expected to include in their reasoning.

Further in the *Current issues* section *Frank Neubacher* and colleagues compare crime data from four different cities over the period 1990-1997 and analyse the processing and selection procedures of the various justice systems.