

Hong Kong lifts first virus lockdown after mass testing

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Hong Kong lifted its first neighbourhood coronavirus lockdown on Monday morning after testing some 7,000 people and finding just a handful of cases as debate swirled over the efficacy of the move.

Over the weekend police moved in to seal off a poor and densely

populated neighbourhood of about 150 apartment blocks where [coronavirus](#) clusters had sprung up in recent weeks.

Officials went door to door conducting mandatory tests and found 0.17 percent of those tested had the virus.

Some community and business leaders were critical of how the lockdown was carried out.

But officials defended the move as proportionate and said they would not rule out similar neighbourhood lockdowns.

"We do not consider this operation a waste of manpower and money," health minister Sophia Chan told reporters on Sunday.

Hong Kong was one of the first places to be struck by the coronavirus after it spilled out of central China.

It has recorded just over 10,000 infections with some 170 deaths by imposing effective but economically punishing social distancing measures for much of the last year.

In recent weeks stubborn clusters have emerged in low-income neighbourhoods notorious for some of the world's most cramped housing.

David Hui, an infectious disease expert advising the government, defended localised lockdowns. But he urged authorities to move more swiftly to stop members of the public leaving ahead of any new order.

"The most worrying part is whether the virus might spread outside as some residents left when they heard the lockdown was coming," Hui told reporters.

News of the weekend's [lockdown](#) leaked to local media on Friday morning and residents were seen leaving the area before police arrived late that evening.

Benjamin Cowling, another epidemiologist at the University of Hong Kong, said blocking off certain neighbourhoods would have a limited effect because the virus remains across the city.

"I'm not sure that locking down other small parts of the city would make a lot of difference in getting on top of the case numbers right now," he told RTHK on Monday.

The [neighbourhood](#) locked down over the weekend has a large South Asian population—a community that often faces discrimination and poverty—and there was criticism over how the operation was handled, including pork products in food parcels for Muslim families.

Last week a senior health official sparked anger when he suggested ethnic minority residents might be spreading the virus more readily because "they like to share food, smoke, drink alcohol and chat together".

Critics countered that poverty and a lack of affordable housing forcing people to live in cramped conditions were to blame—not race or culture.

Food delivery companies have also reported some users have begun requesting no South Asian make deliveries sparking anger from the city's equality watchdog.

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