

# Hong Kong's first eco-friendly prison sparks row

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Businessmen walk past a "caged home" set on a pavement to highlight the plight of impoverished people in the wealthy city of Hong Kong. The semi-autonomous city has gained its first environmentally-friendly prison but the green jail has stirred up a debate in one of the world's most densely populated cities where many live in dingy and overcrowded accommodation.

Hong Kong's first environmentally-friendly prison has stirred up a debate in one of the world's most densely populated cities where many live in dingy and overcrowded high-rise flats.

Billed as the jail of the future, the sprawling 1.5 billion Hong Kong dollar (200 million US) facility was built based on a sustainable concept that promotes open space with green and energy-efficient features.

Authorities said the Lo Wu prison, the newest of the city's 16 prisons, which opened in August, aims to provide more humane living conditions for some 1,400 female inmates as the city moves to ease prison overcrowding.

The prison boasts advanced features such as a "green" roof to lower temperature, rooftop [solar panels](#), a natural lighting system, high-headroom spaces and large dormitory blocks to enhance natural ventilation.

The Lo Wu facility took three years to build and sits on a huge plot of land of about 53,000 square metres (around 570,000 square feet) in the city's outlying New Territories bordering China.

But it has raised eyebrows after winning a green building award last week, with critics saying the government is not doing enough to promote similar healthy living for many of the city's seven million people.

The English-language South China Morning Post ran an editorial with a headline "Green prison shows up failings in our priorities," while readers wrote in to express their anger over the new jail.

"It illustrates perfectly an admirable trait of the Hong Kong public and the [criminal justice system](#) in which the primary hope is that criminals are rehabilitated during their time in jail so that they can contribute constructively to society upon their release," the Post said.

"It is, however, ironic that our convicted criminals have been able to benefit from focused and enlightened environmental planning, while law-abiding citizens so often find their living and working spaces compromised by a whole host of factors," the Post said.



A woman covers her mouth in Causeway Bay district the most polluted and heavily populated area of Hong Kong.

Post reader Jefference Tay expressed similar concerns in a letter to the editor: "It just doesn't make sense to me. I have been to several public housing estates in Hong Kong which have long, dark and airless corridors. Most of the units are extremely small.

"It is sad that the government has no long-term urban planning strategy," Tay wrote.

The glitzy financial hub is one of the world's most affluent cities but many families must still squeeze multiple generations into tiny flats, thanks to rocketing prices and a shortage of residential property.

Costly housing also gave rise to the phenomenon of "cage homes" -- where thousands among the city's poorest cramp into old tenement flats and rent a metal cage barely big enough for a mattress.

A growing income gap has seen the number of people living in poverty rise 8.6 percent in recent years, from 1.16 million in 2005 to 1.26 million in mid-2010, according to Oxfam Hong Kong, a group that campaigns against poverty.

But Hong Kong's Architectural Services Department -- the new jail's designer -- defended the green project, saying it was built in line with government policy to "take the lead and set good examples" in promoting green buildings.

"A facility carefully designed and integrated with such environmentally friendly features provides a humane environment for inmates, and would surely facilitate the effective operation of the staff," information officer Kaman Chong told AFP in an email.



Modern apartments rise behind older buildings in the Sheung Wan district of Hong Kong

"The overall cost for green features in the Lo Wu Correctional Institute project is less than one percent of the overall project cost, and it is within the reasonable range compared with other recent government projects," she said.

A spokeswoman from the Correctional Services Department, which runs the prison, declined comment on the criticism but said the department would strive to make more prisons environmental-friendly "as far as possible" in future.

Rights groups hailed the move to ease congestion in prisons, although they distanced themselves from commenting on the high-tech green features.

"We welcome the government's move to improve the living conditions of inmates -- it is the government's responsibility to do that," Keith Wong, campaign manager for Amnesty International [Hong Kong](#), told AFP.

"The government should provide housing to those who can't afford to rent a place to live, but we can't mix up the two issues because it is a basic human right to ensure prisoners live in a proper place," said the activist.

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