



# The 'Swedish Model' Is a Failure, Not a Panacea

Frida Ghitis | Thursday, May 14, 2020

When economies around the world started grinding to a halt in an effort to stop the carnage inflicted by the coronavirus, Sweden stood out with an approach that appeared to defy the prescription of most experts. Instead of shutting down, the Swedish government opted for much milder measures. The idea looked appealing. It suggested the possibility of containing the pandemic at a much lower economic cost.

The final judgment on Sweden's unorthodox approach cannot be rendered until the crisis moves into the history books. So far, however, the statistics suggest that the Swedish model is more disaster than panacea. If the pandemic ended today, the actions of Swedish authorities, which have so far earned the support of the population, may ultimately be viewed by future generations of Swedes as a shameful chapter in the country's history, one that resulted in large-scale suffering and thousands of unnecessary deaths.

That would be a shift from the initial reaction to news that Swedish schools, restaurants and shops remained open under the guidance of state epidemiologists. When the "Swedish model" started making waves beyond the country's shores, observers' skepticism was leavened with hopefulness, as evidence of an impending global economic depression was emerging.

The founder of the news site Business Insider, Henry Blodget, wrote that Sweden's experience showed how looser lockdowns could prove just as effective (<https://www.businessinsider.com/sweden-lockdown-approach-example-for-us-2020-4>) as the ones strangling economies across the West. Similarly, The New York Times reported approvingly on how Swedish authorities—relying on what they say is Swedes' uncommonly high trust in their government—had turned to voluntary guidelines, bans on gatherings of more than 50 people and other simple rules to manage the challenge without bringing normal life to an end. "Life has to go on," a New York Times headline read, quoting one Swede, for an article that noted (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/28/world/europe/sweden-coronavirus-herd-immunity.html>) that "Sweden's death rate of 22 per 100,000 people is the same as that of Ireland."

The message was clear: Sweden's more relaxed approach was working. That message may have helped fuel the push to reopen the United States before experts said it was safe.



*Sweden's state epidemiologist, Anders Tegnell, takes part in a coronavirus press conference in Stockholm, May 4, 2020 (Photo by Jessica Gow for TT News Agency via AP Images).*

In the two weeks since that New York Times article, Sweden's death rate has soared past Ireland's. (<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus>) Even if it had not, comparing Sweden to Ireland made no sense. Ireland borders the U.K., one of the hardest-hit countries in the world, partly because the British government was slow to enact strong measures. The more logical comparison is with other Scandinavian countries, which have followed the more common lockdown approach.

When looking at death statistics, it may seem obvious, but it is imperative to bear in mind what they refer to. Each number is a human being, whose death can bring crushing pain to many others, including relatives and friends. At this writing, Sweden has reported 3,460 deaths. That's 343 deaths per million people, one of the highest mortality rates from COVID-19 in the world (<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>).

The number is particularly grim compared to Sweden's neighbors (<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>). Norway has suffered 229 deaths, or 42 per million people; Finland 284, or 51 per million; Denmark 533, or 92 per million. Viewed another way, Sweden's death rates from COVID-19 are 816 percent those of Norway, 672 percent those of Finland and 372 percent those of Denmark. If Sweden's death rate were the same as Norway's, thousands more Swedes would be alive today.

***As Sweden continues reporting hundreds of new cases and scores of new deaths each day, neighboring countries that followed a more orthodox path are emerging from lockdown.***

And yet, the architect of this strategy, Anders Tegnell, the chief epidemiologist at Sweden's Public Health Agency, has become a superstar in the country; some Swedes are even getting tattoos of his likeness (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-tegnell-tattoo/the-man-with-the-epidemiologist-tattoo-a-very-swedish-tribute-idUSKCN2292G7>). Prime Minister Stefan Lofven's popularity is also surging. Tegnell maintains the approach is succeeding. As other officials do, he rejects the "draconian" measures imposed by other countries, claiming they are unsustainable and unnecessarily harmful to the economy.

The principal aim of his strategy, he says, was to protect the health system's ability to function without overwhelming it. He claims credit for that and blames nursing homes for the deaths, which have disproportionately struck the elderly. He also argues that by allowing young, healthy people to become infected and recover, the country will be better protected if or when a second wave strikes. Experts note, however, that we don't know much about how much immunity a previous infection confers

(<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2020/04/28/coronavirus-covid-19-sweden-anders-tegnell-herd-immunity/3031536001/>).

But Sweden's model—along with Tegnell and Lofven—remains popular, with a small majority approving of the coronavirus response (<https://www.thelocal.se/20200511/coronavirus-survey-what-do-swedes-really-think-of-the-countrys-approach>) in a recent poll.

What is most attractive about Sweden's approach to observers around the world is its impact on the economy. But there too, Stockholm's decision to avoid a shutdown also looks less effective than its fans have hoped.

Riksbank, the Swedish central bank, has offered two economic projections for this year, both dismal. The brighter one predicts a GDP contraction of 6.9 percent; the other, with different assumptions, predicts a 9.7 percent drop of GDP. In either case, it's a major recession (<https://www.ft.com/content/93105160-dcb4-4721-9e58-a7b262cd4b6e>).

Those numbers are no better than Sweden's neighbors. Norway is projecting a 5.5 percent drop in GDP (<https://finance.yahoo.com/news/norway-first-quarter-gdp-contracts-062000557.html>), Finland and Denmark about 6 to 6.5 percent. However lively the restaurant scene looks in Stockholm and Gothenburg, Sweden's economy will still suffer from disrupted manufacturing supply chains and a collapse in exports.

Meanwhile, as Sweden continues reporting hundreds of new cases and scores of new deaths each day, neighboring countries that followed a more orthodox path are starting to emerge from lockdown.

Denmark, for example, has seen the number of deaths from the coronavirus taper into single digits, with the number of new cases in the dozens. As a result, it has started gradually allowing economic and social activities again. Copenhagen imposed a strict lockdown early in the pandemic, and it's now in the fourth week of reopening. Children have gone back to school, observing detailed protocols of hand-washing and physical distancing. Many Danish businesses are functioning without any evidence that COVID-19 is spiking again. The government announced it will soon allow theaters and museums to reopen, and plans to lift what remains of the lockdown by June 8. Denmark has done all that (<https://www.thelocal.dk/20200508/denmark-to-lift-most-remaining-restrictions-in-early-june>) with a death toll a small fraction of Sweden's.

Whenever the pandemic, and however many waves it brings, is finished battering the planet, each country can tally the damage, the deaths, the illnesses and the economic devastation. Maybe then, Sweden's approach will emerge as a triumph. But for now, it looks like a dismal, tragic failure.

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