

Sweden forced to admit significant under-counting of coronavirus deaths

By Jordan Shilton
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Sweden's National Board of Health and Welfare released figures Tuesday revealing that the death toll from the coronavirus has been underestimated in public figures. This came as total infections in the country of 10 million passed 20,000 yesterday, with almost 2,500 deaths.

The discrepancy is due to the Public Health Agency's policy of only counting deaths following a positive COVID-19 test confirmed by a laboratory. However, the National Board of Health and Welfare noted that as of 21 April, only 82 percent of the deaths it linked to coronavirus had a positive lab test. Assuming that this difference has persisted over the last week, there would have been approximately 400 more deaths from the virus than the 2,462 officially recorded yesterday by the Public Health Agency.

This significant under-counting of deaths is not to be explained by an error, but is the direct product of the Swedish government's "herd immunity" strategy. Unlike its Nordic neighbours and other European countries, Sweden avoided imposing a general lock-down and even delayed for some time the issuing of limited social distancing guidelines. Gatherings of up to 50 people are still permitted, and shops, restaurants, schools, and non-essential businesses of all types remain open.

As a result, the population has been subjected to a reckless experiment that some scientists have likened to playing "Russian roulette." Even taking the lower official death toll as a point of comparison, the death rate in Sweden dramatically exceeds neighbouring countries. In Norway, for example, which has a population approximately half the size of Sweden's, 7,660 cases and 206 deaths have been recorded. Sweden therefore has a death rate more than five times higher than its neighbour per head of population.

The refusal to impose strict social distancing measures is stretching the health care system to its limits. At Tuesday's daily briefing, Johanna Sandwall, crisis

manager at the National Board of Health and Welfare, stated that across the country, intensive care units have 30 percent spare capacity. However, she acknowledged that in some areas, there was zero spare capacity. Asked where these were, she refused to answer.

Stockholm has been the hardest hit region, recording close to 8,000 cases and over half of Sweden's total deaths. The virus has run rampant through the capital region's elderly care homes, with residents accounting for half of all deaths in the Stockholm region.

In a revealing remark, state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell, who leads the daily press conferences on COVID-19, justified Sweden's strategy by arguing that it is necessary to have a controlled spread of the virus, rather than preventing it from infecting the public. Although he claims the authorities are not consciously pursuing a "herd immunity" policy, that is the logic of this approach.

Last week, the Public Health Agency was forced to correct a blatant error in its figures. Tegnell claimed on Monday, 20 April that Stockholm was just weeks away from "herd immunity," claiming one third of the region's population had already been infected. Several days later, the Public Health Agency revised this figure down to 26 percent, which remains highly speculative given the dearth of coronavirus testing.

Expert criticism of the government's handling of the crisis continues to grow. On 12 April, 22 scientists from numerous research institutes and universities published an article in the *Dagens Nyheter* newspaper urging the closure of all cafes and schools. Using data from the three days leading up to Easter weekend, they showed the impact of the government's failure to take decisive action. On April 7-9, they wrote, "10.2 people per million inhabitants died of COVID-19 each day in Sweden, in Italy the figure was 9.7, in Denmark it was 2.9, in Norway 2.0 and in Finland 0.9."

Additionally, the article called for providing proper protective equipment for health care workers dealing with the elderly, and mass testing for medical staff.

The horrific consequences of the authorities' failure to implement such measures emerged last week, when a 39-year-old nurse died after contracting COVID-19 from a patient at Karolinska University Hospital in Huddinge.

Sonja Aspinen, an elderly care nurse in Nynäshman, south of Stockholm, said the lack of equipment has helped spread the virus throughout care homes. "There has not been a will to test us systematically, at least in those places where I have worked. Even there have been people with symptoms, but they have not been tested," she told Euronews.

Social Democrat Prime Minister Stefan Löfven acknowledged that "preparedness has not been good enough" for the pandemic, but placed the blame on previous governments for creating a shortage of resources in health care and social services.

The right-wing Alliance coalition government, led by Frederick Reinfeldt between 2006 and 2014, doubtless implemented many regressive reforms, including a vast expansion of private sector involvement in public services such as education and health care. But for Löfven and the Social Democrats to wash their hands of responsibility for the growth of inequality in Sweden and the decimation of public services is thoroughly cynical. Göran Persson's Social Democrat-led government was instrumental in laying the basis between 1995 and 2006 for the Alliance's privatisation drive.

After the 2008 economic crisis, Löfven, as head of the powerful IF Metall trade union, struck a deal with Swedish employers to enforce shorter working hours and pay cuts. Anders Weihe, chief negotiator for Sweden's industrial employers' association, commented approvingly on Löfven at the time: "He doesn't look for battles and conflict, but for solutions."

When Löfven came to power in 2014 leading a minority Social Democrat-led government with the Greens, he concluded a pact with the four Alliance members—the Moderates, Centre Party, Liberals, and Christian Democrats—to stay in power. The deal involved Löfven's Social Democrats enforcing the Alliance's budget in 2015, and gave the right-wing parties veto power over subsequent Social Democrat spending plans. This reactionary move, marking a decisive shift to the right in Swedish politics, was portrayed as necessary to block the rise of the far-right Sweden Democrats.

After the 2018 parliamentary election, Löfven took this

cooperation a step further when he reached an agreement with the Centre and Liberal parties to vote for him as Prime Minister.

Predictably, in light of this record, the main focus of Löfven's government during the coronavirus crisis has been to protect the wealth of Sweden's banks and big business. The government made available a 300 billion kronor (€27 billion) package of tax deferrals for big business, while the Swedish central bank rolled out a 500 billion kronor loan programme for businesses. The central bank has cut interest rates to zero for investors.

The vast majority of loans do not support small businesses, but allow major corporations to restructure at the expense of the working class. A typical example is Scandinavian Airlines, partially owned by the Swedish and Danish governments. Just two weeks after Stockholm unveiled a €455 million bailout fund for airlines, of which more than €200 million is to go to Scandinavian Airlines, the company unveiled plans to lay-off 1,900 full-time workers in Sweden. The job cuts are part of a broader cost-cutting programme that will involve the elimination of 4,900 jobs across Scandinavia.

On 14 April, the Labour Board projected that unemployment could hit 10 percent by the summer. This would surpass the 8.6 percent jobless rate reached in 2010 following the global financial crisis.

The wave of layoffs was facilitated by the Unionen trade union, which concluded an agreement with the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise in March allowing employers to slash working hours for or impose temporary layoffs on around 500,000 workers. The deal provided for the government to pay up to 90 percent of a worker's previous wages. However, the uptick in layoffs shows businesses are using this scheme above all to restructure their operations.

One of the largest employers to take advantage of the scheme was truck maker AB Volvo, which placed all of its 20,000 staff on the temporary lay-off scheme in late March.

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