

Swedish health officials admit “herd immunity” policy led to “too many” deaths

By Jordan Shilton
5 June 2020

Anders Tegnell, who as state epidemiologist is responsible for Sweden’s coronavirus policy, has been forced to acknowledge that the effective pursuit of a “herd immunity” strategy by opposing lockdown measures has produced a catastrophic level of death. His remarks are not merely an expression of the mounting crisis for the Swedish political establishment, but a damning indictment of all the bourgeois media outlets and politicians internationally who held up the “Swedish model” to enforce a reckless back-to-work campaign that threatens the lives of millions around the world.

There is “quite obviously a potential for improvement in what we have done,” commented Tegnell. Asked whether the strategy of the Swedish authorities of allowing most schools, restaurants, bars and businesses to remain open, and refusing to impose strict contact restrictions had produced too many deaths, he answered, “Yes, absolutely.”

As of yesterday, Sweden recorded over 40,000 infections and 4,562 deaths in a country of just 10 million people. On a seven-day rolling average, Sweden recorded the highest death rate in the world for the seven-day period ending on 2 June. This was the second time over the past month that Sweden led the global death rate over a seven-day period.

The deaths have overwhelmingly affected the elderly living in under-resourced and poorly-staffed care homes, who were effectively denied intensive care treatment in hospitals in many areas. Immigrant and other low-income communities where residents could not social distance have also suffered badly. Compared to its Nordic neighbors, all of whom implemented tougher lockdowns, Sweden has lost 10 times more citizens per head of population than Norway, seven times more than Finland, and four-and-a-half times more than Denmark.

Sweden’s policy has been lauded internationally by mouthpieces for the financial elite and big business, who

were determined to force working people back to their jobs as soon as multibillion-dollar bailouts for the financial oligarchy were completed. Under the headline “Is Sweden doing it right?”, Thomas Friedman demanded in a column in the *New York Times* in late April that everyone must “adapt to the coronavirus — by design — the way Sweden is attempting to do.” Stockholm’s goal is “herd immunity through exposure,” continued Friedman.

In early May, Germany’s *Der Spiegel* news magazine granted a lengthy interview to Johann Carlson, general director of Sweden’s Public Health Agency, to claim that “closing schools is excessive.” The following weeks saw an editorial in Britain’s *Financial Times*, “Sweden chooses a third way on coronavirus,” and an article in the influential policy journal *Foreign Affairs*, “Sweden’s coronavirus strategy will soon be the world’s.” The latter piece was produced by researchers who had no expertise in infectious diseases or medicine from a think tank funded by the Swedish Confederation of Employers.

As the scale of the death produced by such criminal policies begins to become clear, all of these authors and publications should be held to account. Their propaganda helped facilitate the adoption of the premature lifting of lockdown measures throughout Europe and North America, the reopening of schools, and the sending of workers back to unsafe workplaces. In effect, they helped implement policies that follow in the footsteps of Sweden’s disastrous COVID-19 strategy.

Neighboring governments have been forced to acknowledge the reality that Sweden remains a high-risk area for infections. While Norway, Denmark and Finland agreed to open their borders for travel between each country, they excluded Sweden from the arrangement. Cyprus has barred Swedish tourists even as it recklessly opens its borders to travelers from across Europe.

The mounting public criticism has forced the government to adopt some face-saving measures.

Yesterday, Health Minister Lena Hallengren announced that the government would pay for everyone with symptoms to be tested for coronavirus at a cost of 5 billion kronor (around €560 million). Sweden has consistently maintained one of the lowest rates of testing in Europe due to an extremely restrictive testing policy. The government's goal of processing 100,000 tests a week by the end of May never came close to being reached.

The lack of testing played an important role in the crisis in elderly care facilities. Staff found it almost impossible to get tested, allowing the virus to spread undetected. However, the main problem for care workers is precarious employment. Many workers are paid by the hour by private job agencies. Pay is so low and jobs so insecure that care workers simply could not afford to stay home even when they had symptoms. A random check of 57 care workers at a Gothenburg care home on one day found that 40 percent had symptoms, including coughing, fevers, and sore throats. Four tested positive for COVID-19.

This state of affairs is the product of years of savage austerity. An investigation by the trade union-aligned Arena Ide think tank found that 96 percent of Sweden's municipalities plan to cut spending on care for the elderly during 2020.

Hallengren, who still insists she "would not have wanted a lockdown" knowing what she knows now, sought to blame the entire population for these conditions in a recent interview. "Nobody can say anything other than that it is a society-wide failure that the infection entered the homes of the elderly and that we had in fact not equipped elderly care to cope with this situation," she told *The Local*.

This is a lie. The privatization of elderly care and the health care sector more generally is the product of decades of right-wing, neoliberal policies implemented by the political establishment, including governments led by Social Democrats and conservatives alike. Sweden became a center for state-funded free schools and hospitals operated by private conglomerates.

John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, former editors of the free market *Economist* magazine, wrote in a 2014 book: "The streets of Stockholm are awash with the blood of sacred cows. The local think tanks are overflowing with fresh ideas about welfare entrepreneurs and lean management. Indeed, Sweden has done most of the things that politicians know they ought to do but seldom have the courage to attempt."

These hard-right prescriptions proved deadly when the pandemic hit. Sweden's "lean" hospital system, which has among the lowest rates of beds per head of population in Europe, was not able to deal with the surge of COVID-19 patients. Health care was severely rationed, with many elderly care home residents not even brought to the hospital. A study by Germany's public broadcaster *NDR* found that less than 1 percent of people aged 80 and over infected by COVID-19 received intensive care treatment in Sweden compared to 12 percent in Germany.

The rapidly mounting death toll and the continued spread of the pandemic threatens to destabilize Sweden's political establishment. The Social Democrat/Green government has been forced to concede to the demands of the conservative Moderate Party and far-right Sweden Democrats for a commission of inquiry prior to the summer break. Prime Minister Stefan Löfven initially wanted to delay the inquiry until after the pandemic.

More fundamentally, however, public trust in the government is collapsing. While a poll conducted in April found that 63 percent of Swedes either had fairly high or very high faith in the government's approach to the pandemic, the latest edition of the Novus poll released yesterday saw the figure collapse to 45 percent.

It is no mere coincidence that thousands of people in major Swedish cities, including Stockholm and Malmö, participated this week in mass protests against the brutal police killing of George Floyd and police violence in general. Participants who spoke to the media stressed that domestic issues with police racism and the targeting of impoverished immigrant communities were also motivating factors. Around 2,900 demonstrated in Malmö yesterday. Thousands more took to the streets in Stockholm on Wednesday, where police confronted a group of protesters with pepper spray.

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