

## Sweden Saw Lower Mortality Rate Than Most of Europe in 2020, Despite No Lockdown

New data from Europe suggest Sweden's laissez-faire approach to the pandemic was far from catastrophic.

Friday, March 26, 2021



Image Credit: Wikimedia Commons



Jon Miltimore

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**F**ew people in 2020 came under more heat than Anders Tegnell, Sweden's top epidemiologist.

But the man who forged [Sweden's laissez-faire](#) approach to COVID-19 early in the pandemic says new international data reveal a hard truth about government lockdowns.

“I think people will probably think very carefully about these total shutdowns, how good they really were,” Tegnell told *Reuters* [in a recent interview](#). “They may have had an effect in the short term, but when you look at it throughout the pandemic, you become more and more doubtful.”

Tegnell was referring to data published by *Reuters* that show Sweden, which shunned the strict lockdowns embraced by most nations around the world, experienced a smaller increase in its mortality rate than most European countries in 2020.

Preliminary data from EU statistics agency Eurostat compiled by Reuters showed Sweden had 7.7% more deaths in 2020 than its average for the preceding four years. Countries that opted for several periods of strict lockdowns, such as Spain and Belgium, had so-called excess mortality of 18.1% and 16.2% respectively.

Twenty-one of the 30 countries with available statistics had higher excess mortality than Sweden. However, Sweden did much worse than its Nordic neighbours, with Denmark registering just 1.5% excess mortality and Finland 1.0%. Norway had no excess mortality at all in 2020.

"Some believed that it was possible to eliminate disease transmission by shutting down society. We did not believe that and we have been proven right." - Johan Carlson, Director, Public Health Agency of Sweden [@CarlsonJFoHM](#) [@Folkhalsomyndh](#)<https://t.co/GEQH8YpP1N>

— Martin Kulldorff (@MartinKulldorff) [March 26, 2021](#)

## (More) Vindication

For nearly a year, Sweden was at the forefront of the debate over how governments should respond to the coronavirus.

Reports last April showed that despite widespread criticism for not embracing a full government lockdown, COVID-19 had reached what Tegnell [described as a “plateau” in Sweden](#).

“If Tegnell’s characterization turns out to be true, it will be quite a vindication for Sweden, which has been widely denounced for bucking the trend among governments of imposing draconian ‘shelter-at-home’ decrees that have crippled the world economy and thrown millions out of work,” *Bloomberg* [reported](#).

Months later, data showed that Sweden [had successfully](#) “flattened the curve” in contrast to many other global hot spots.

Here’s the good news: You can shut down businesses or keep them open. Close schools or stay in session. Wear masks or not. The virus will make its way through in either case, and if we protect the elderly then deaths will be spared. [pic.twitter.com/AVg0Vu8aH2](https://pic.twitter.com/AVg0Vu8aH2)

— Yinon Weiss (@yionow) [July 13, 2020](#)

Many critics countered by comparing Sweden’s death rate to its Nordic counterparts Norway and Finland, which had some of the lowest mortality rates in Europe. Norway and Finland, however, embraced policies [even less restrictive](#) than Sweden's for most of the pandemic.

Public health experts in Sweden say the latest data are further evidence that Sweden was one of the few nations to get the virus right. “Some believed that it was possible to eliminate disease transmission by shutting down society,” said Johan Carlson, Director, Public Health Agency of Sweden. “We did not believe that and we have been proven right.”

# The Dark Side of Lockdowns

Pandemics are awful and COVID-19 is a nasty virus. (I had it recently myself, and it was no picnic. I was severely sick for days.) But lawmakers around the world made two severe miscalculations when they decided to discard fundamental liberties and embrace lockdowns.

First, they concluded that they could contain a virus through central planning. They failed—as [numerous academic studies](#) show.

Second, policymakers forgot the basic reality of [tradeoffs](#), something economist and political scientist James Harrigan [recognized](#) early in the pandemic.

In times of crisis, people want someone to do something, and don't want to hear about tradeoffs. This is the breeding ground for grand policies driven by the mantra, "if it saves just one life." New York Governor Andrew Cuomo [invoked](#) the mantra to defend his closure policies. The mantra has echoed across the country from [county councils](#) to [mayors](#) to [school boards](#) to [police](#) to [clergy](#) as justification for closures, curfews, and enforced social distancing.

Rational people understand this isn't how the world works. Regardless of whether we acknowledge them, tradeoffs exist.

What Harrigan and Davies were getting at is that policies don't always work as planned. They often come with a host of unintended consequences, which can be adverse or even destructive.

"Every human action has both intended and unintended consequences," Antony Davies and James Harrigan explained. "Human beings react to every rule, regulation, and order governments impose, and their reactions result in outcomes that can be quite different than the outcomes lawmakers intended."

One reason Sweden saw a lower mortality rate than most of its European counterparts is because its leaders recognized this. As a result, Sweden avoided much of the collateral damage associated with lockdowns, which includes economic distress, increased suicide, depression from social isolation, drug and alcohol abuse, and other adverse public health consequences.

America did not. For example, the US saw mental health hit [a 20-year low last year](#). The CDC reports surging depression in young people. There have been spikes in [suicide](#), [drug overdoses](#),

Globally, we've seen similar trends. Child suicide is surging around the world, physicians recently told the *Associated Press*.

"This is an international epidemic, and we are not recognizing it," said Dr. David Greenhorn, who works in the emergency unit at England's Bradford Royal Infirmary. "In an 8-year-old's life, a year is a really, really, really long time. They are fed up. They can't see an end to it."

This is heart-wrenching. It's also maddening because top US public health acknowledged early in the pandemic that extended lockdowns could cause "irreparable damage."

"We can't stay locked down for such a considerable period of time that you might do irreparable damage and have unintended consequences, including consequences for health," Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious-disease expert, [told CNBC last year](#).

Fauci was right. Unfortunately, unlike Tegnell, he didn't have the courage of his convictions. And Americans paid the price.



## **Jon Miltimore**

Jonathan Miltimore is the Managing Editor of FEE.org. His writing/reporting has been the subject of articles in TIME magazine, The Wall

Street Journal, CNN, Forbes, Fox News, and the Star Tribune.

Bylines: Newsweek, The Washington Times, MSN.com, The Washington Examiner, The Daily Caller, The Federalist, the Epoch Times.

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