

Europe

# Pandemic - Responsibility of the Swedish left for Sweden's COVID-19 tragedy

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**Why have the Swedish authorities not taken more vigorous steps to slow the spread of a virus that has taken such an unequal toll?**

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While the British left has criticized the UK's erratic handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Swedish left has backed a national response that has led to death, ill health, and ruin among many of the country's most vulnerable groups. Breaching its own values, it has made itself complicit in the managerial incompetence and moral bankruptcy of the Swedish pandemic response. This has left a stain on it that may take many years to remove.

I am writing this in my three-bedroom flat in a town in central Sweden that I have not left since March. As a lecturer at a university in Stockholm, I can do all of my work remotely: my teaching, my research, and my administrative tasks. If I wanted to, I could also secure all my food and essentials online. Yet I am under no obligation to remain cloistered in my home. Under [Sweden's lax pandemic restrictions](#), during the past five months I have been free to go and come as I please, jogging in my neighbourhood, riding my bike along the lakeside, and, had I so wished, visiting cafés, restaurants, pubs and gyms.

Sweden's pandemic strategy appears to be designed for people like me: relatively young (I am 35) and healthy members of Sweden's large middle class who do not use public transport to get to work. It is based around [a number of public health recommendations](#): work remotely if you can, stay at home if you show symptoms, wash your hands regularly, self-isolate if you are sick.

All Swedes are encouraged to follow them. Yet, it is far easier to do so if you have a spacious flat, a digitalized work space, a secure job, and a wash basin close at hand. It helps, too, if you read and understand Swedish well enough to be able to easily access public information about the disease.

## Opting for laissez-faire

By no means everyone in Sweden has been in this position. Public transport workers, health

workers, taxi drivers, and shop assistants cannot work remotely. People in crowded flats who fall ill cannot easily self-isolate. Residents in care homes cannot stay away from staff who fail to protect them. Elderly immigrants who do not know Swedish struggled to access public information about the disease during the early weeks of the crisis, [when the authorities were slow in issuing information in languages other than Swedish](#).

In otherwise heavily regulated Sweden, the authorities have opted for a laissez-faire approach to the pandemic that has devolved much of the responsibility for curbing the contagion to individual citizens. Yet, as has become painfully clear over the past five months, individuals do not possess equal means to protect themselves and others, nor are they at equal risk from the virus.

Predictably, the brunt of the pandemic has been borne by the poor, the physically weak, those already sick and the elderly. In Stockholm, people in disadvantaged areas have been [many times more likely to contract and die from the virus](#) than residents in wealthy neighbourhoods. [People in service professions](#) have been heavily affected, as have people of [certain immigrant backgrounds](#), especially those born in Somalia, Syria and Iraq.

Worst hit of all have been Sweden's elderly. In a country of ten million, more than 5000 people aged 70 or above have died in the pandemic. It is a national tragedy that has been accompanied by horror stories of [death waves in care homes](#) and of elderly patients receiving [lethal injections of morphine and benzodiazepine](#) instead of oxygen. It contrasts sharply with the situation in Sweden's Nordic neighbours, where only around [1200 people altogether](#) have perished from Covid-19 out of a combined population of over 17 million at the time of writing.

## **Rapid spread**

Other governments might have been prompted by such figures to change their approach. But Sweden's left-leaning government has dug its heels in, even as the country's death toll has approached 6000. Prime Minister Stefan Löfven made his views on the matter abundantly clear: "The strategy is right", he stated bluntly in a [recent interview](#) with the daily Aftonbladet.

Refusing to fault the strategy, the Swedish government and the public health authority that leads Sweden's pandemic response have scrambled to shift the blame elsewhere. Primarily, they have pinned it on senior care homes which [they say](#) failed to keep their residents safe from the virus. Yet this is disingenuous, for it ignores the complicity of central state bodies in the disaster in the care homes. Among other things, the ministry of social affairs was [slow in issuing clear guidelines](#) to care homes and the minister for health and social affairs, Lena Hallengren, omitted care homes from a crisis management exercise [in early March](#). Moreover, the public health authority [expressly downplayed](#) the dangers of working without PPE in care homes and [advised that Covid-19 was unlikely](#) to spread asymptotically or presymptotically.

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But most of all, it ignores that the main cause of the high fatality rate in Swedish care homes for the elderly has been the high rate of spread of the virus in Sweden. The share of older persons in Covid-19 fatalities in Sweden has been [virtually identical](#) to those in neighbouring countries, suggesting that elderly in Sweden [are not necessarily more vulnerable than elsewhere](#). Indeed, as

numerous Swedish epidemiologists and geriatrists have pointed out, what sets Sweden apart from its neighbours is not some unique defencelessness of its elderly population, but the fact that the country has had a much higher rate of contagion owing to a less proactive policy. Put crassly, more Swedish elderly have caught Sars-CoV-2, because there has been more Sars-CoV-2 around to catch in Sweden.

### **“A middle class strategy”**

Blaming the care homes has been one of several excuses peddled by the Swedish authorities to deflect blame. Another one has been that Sweden, unlike, supposedly, other countries, [has taken a whole-of-society approach](#), seeking to protect the general health of the population rather than focus narrowly on limiting Covid-19 deaths. There is some merit to this argument, as sharp lockdowns have led to a spike in [domestic abuse](#), [depression](#) and other ills in certain countries.

But it is also a strawman argument, for between Sweden’s hands-off strategy and the strict lockdowns in some places, there is a spectrum of other possible measures. Sweden’s socially, culturally and politically similar Nordic neighbours have taken milder steps and experienced apparently less averse consequences than countries like the UK and France which imposed stringent lockdowns. According to a [study](#) by the Norwegian public health agency, for instance, Norwegians have experienced only minor changes in their quality of life since the crisis.

This can be set against the vast and documented suffering that the disease has brought in Sweden. Since early March, over 5700 Swedes have died, tens of thousands have lost their loved ones, medical workers have suffered [physical and mental pressures at work](#), an unknown number have become [long-term ill](#), people over 70 and other at-risk groups have been required to self-isolate for months with no end in sight and a very large number of medical treatments have been [scaled down, postponed or cancelled altogether](#) to free up resources for the treatment of Covid-19 patients.

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As Sweden’s public health has taken a blow, its economy has declined [almost as sharply as its neighbours’](#), its international reputation [has plummeted](#) and it continues to record high death rates, it is difficult to see what benefits Sweden’s strategy has brought beyond allowing the country’s healthy, working-age middle class to lead a life with few restrictions.

It is not for nothing that the strategy has been described as “[liberal](#)” and a “[middle class strategy](#)” and has been praised by the [American far right](#) and Brazil’s rightist leader [Jair Bolsonaro](#).

Even so, Sweden’s left-wing pundits have largely stood by the government. With only a few [exceptions](#), they have refrained from criticizing a strategy that has delegated responsibility for managing the contagion to individuals who lack equal means or indeed an equal interest to stop it.

### **“Alternative researchers”**

Anders Lindberg, the chief political editor of left-leaning Aftonbladet, has been one of the staunchest supporters of the government line. He has [repeated government talking points](#) on the pages of his newspaper – and on Twitter, he even branded a group of reputable scientific researchers who have

criticised the official approach as “[alternative researchers](#)” in a Trumpian slur that he has failed to retract since.

Like [other](#) op-ed writers in Aftonbladet, he has avoided blaming the decisions of government ministers or the public health authority for Sweden’s calamity and focused on [the reality of Swedish class divides](#). But while those divides certainly exist, one might ask why Lindberg has not implored the Swedish authorities to take more vigorous steps to slow the spread of a virus that has taken such an unequal toll.

Another left-wing pundit is the more mild-mannered journalist, Göran Greider. Less combative than Lindberg, Greider has repeatedly [made the claim](#) – also a favourite talking point of the authorities – that it is too early to evaluate the Swedish strategy, because the pandemic is likely to last for a long time still. But Greider misses the point that the criticisms that have been directed at the strategy have not been evaluative. They have been peremptory – demanding that Sweden change its course before it is too late.

There is a small but growing movement of progressive critics of the Swedish approach. I count myself among them. Ironically, however, it is mainly right-of-centre and liberal newspapers like [Expressen](#) and [Dagens Nyheter](#) that have addressed the class dimensions of the Swedish crisis response. They have seized the ground in the public discussion that ought to be the birth right of the left.

### **What’s left?**

Some left-wing commentators have [argued](#) that the pandemic may usher in a new progressive wave, as it has revealed the importance of having a strong public sector, a well-funded social safety net and good working conditions for essential workers.

Perhaps they are right. But a different story can also be told. That story tells of a left-leaning Swedish government that failed to seize a historical moment to rally Swedes around values of solidarity and compassion – asking the young, the healthy and the well-off to make small sacrifices for those who were most at risk. It tells of a left-leaning government that embraced a strategy that privileged the healthy and resilient but exposed the vulnerable to unnecessary contagion. It tells of a government that failed to honour the most basic social contract between the state and its citizens: to do what it could to protect the life and health of all.

After seeing the incompetence and moral bankruptcy of Sweden’s hands-off approach, one may well ask the Social Democratic Party and the Green Party that have presided over the Covid-19 crisis: will all your talk of solidarity and equality not ring hollow in the future after this reckless gamble with the lives of your citizens?

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**P.S.**

• Open Democracy. 10 August 2020:  
<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/responsibility-of-the-swedish-left-for-sweden>

[s-covid-19-tragedy/](#)

- Markus Balázs Göransson articles:

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/author/markus-balazs-goransson/>