

Failure to halt COVID-19 spread leads to mass deaths in Swedish elder care homes

Jordan Shilton
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The refusal of Sweden's Social Democrat/Green government to impose lockdown measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus has won widespread praise in international media. Publications from *USA Today* to Britain's *Daily Telegraph* and Germany's *Der Spiegel* have hailed Sweden's "unique" response to the crisis as an example of how to weigh economic interests against human life. Anders Tegnell, Sweden's state epidemiologist, and other top health officials have been afforded extensive space to propagate what is in all essentials, their denials notwithstanding, a policy of herd immunity.

This is made especially clear in the horrific death toll recorded in Sweden's elderly care homes. Of the more than 3,300 deaths reported to date, half have been care home residents; another quarter received care at home. These terrible numbers are underestimates, as Swedish official statistics only include cases where a positive coronavirus test has been confirmed by a lab.

With a population of just 10 million, Sweden's death toll is more than three times the combined fatalities in Denmark, Finland, and Norway, which together have more than 16 million inhabitants.

The virus has run rampant in care homes above all due to inadequate protective equipment and the precarious nature of care-sector jobs. As a consequence of privatisation policies supported by the entire political establishment in Sweden since the 1990s, private providers have made vast sums out of elderly care, while staff lack job protection and adequate equipment. "They had paper napkins attached to rubber bands, that was their face masks," a Swedish doctor told Germany's *Süddeutsche Zeitung* about conditions in care homes.

Reports have emerged of care workers with symptoms continuing to work for fear of losing their jobs and their income. In Sörmland, a region whose care homes have seen major outbreaks, at least 20 percent of all staff in half of the homes are hourly employees or employed by a staffing agency, meaning they receive no pay if they stay at home. Authorities also failed to carry out mass testing of care

workers to identify who was infected. Sweden has conducted just 14,700 tests per 1 million inhabitants, less than than Peru or Chile.

Strong evidence suggests that the authorities are refusing anyone over the age of 80 intensive care treatment in the Stockholm region, home to about half of all Sweden's cases. According to German public broadcaster NDR, less than 1 percent of all coronavirus patients aged 80 or over—just 50 from over 5,200—received intensive care treatment.

By contrast, the same figure for patients in that age group in Germany was 12 percent, according to an analysis based on a smaller group of patients conducted by the Robert Koch Institute. Johnny Hellgren, head of Sweden's Intensive Care Register, told NDR, "There may be more ethical discussions and more discussions about futility before a patient is admitted to intensive care in Sweden."

Behind euphemisms about "ethical discussions," the Swedish ruling class acts with callous disregard for human life. Public criticism is mounting, including from medical experts demanding more-rigorous confinement measures and more testing and contact tracing.

The Social Democrat/Green coalition has responded by promoting Swedish nationalism and collective responsibility. Prime Minister Stefan Löfven acknowledged that his government had not sufficiently protected the elderly, while unveiling a minuscule 2 billion kronor (around €189 million) in additional support for the elderly-care sector. This is a mere fraction of the hundreds of billions made available to large companies and the banks by state bailouts.

Social Affairs Minister Lena Hallengren, also a Social Democrat, added, "As a society, we bear joint responsibility for this sector not being better equipped. We paid too little attention to the workers, their working conditions, and the reputation of their profession."

This is a pack of lies. The Swedish people are not collectively responsible for the disastrous response to the pandemic. On the contrary, the very high fatality rate in Sweden is due to the government's refusal to impose a

lockdown and carry out mass testing, as well as to policies of privatisation and attacks on workers pursued over the past two decades that have devastated health care, elderly care, and other key social services.

Unlike other European countries, Swedish authorities allowed most schools, all restaurants, bars, and clubs, and most businesses to remain open throughout the pandemic. Gatherings of up to 50 people are still permitted.

This allowed the virus to spread largely unchecked across a country whose health and social services were in no condition to deal with an upsurge in patients. From the 1994-2006 Social Democrat government, to Frederick Reinfeldt's right-wing Alliance (2006-2014), and the Social Democrat Löfven's period in office (2014-present), each government intensified the destruction of health care, social services and the welfare state, which at one time was among the most comprehensive in the world.

Löfven's Social Democrats have played a crucial role in continuing to enforce austerity for working people and tax cuts and subsidies for the wealthy. After emerging as the largest party from the 2014 election, but without a parliamentary majority, the Social Democrats and Greens struck an unprecedented deal with the right-wing Alliance parties to stay in office.

The agreement with the Moderate, Centre, Liberal, and Christian Democrat parties committed the Social Democrats to implementing the Alliance's 2015 budget and gave the four opposition parties a veto over subsequent spending. After the 2018 election, the Social Democrats and Greens concluded a more formal cooperative agreement with the Centre and Liberal parties to secure a parliamentary majority.

The embrace of the traditional right by Sweden's Social Democrats was dressed up as a bold move to stop the rise of the far-right Sweden Democrats. In truth, however, it was part of a broader shift of social democratic parties and their trade union backers worldwide towards free-market policies and support for imperialist wars. Sweden joined in the bombardment of Libya in 2011, and integrated its armed forces into US-led NATO operations against Russia.

According to the Heritage Foundation, a right-wing US think-tank, Sweden takes first place in its global privatisation rankings. No other country privatised more public services between 1996 and 2012 than Sweden, the think-tank noted.

In addition to the elderly-care sector, privatisation initiatives led to an explosive growth in private hospitals and schools. Sweden's education system increasingly funnels public funds to privately run educational institutions, a model that inspired David Cameron's Tory government in Britain in its approach to privatising schools.

The brutal reality of Sweden's approach to COVID-19 is that thousands of lives are being sacrificed to enrich a financial elite that has dramatically increased its wealth in recent years by destroying the very social services and workers' protections now so glaringly lacking. Income inequality has risen in no other OECD country more quickly than Sweden since the 1990s.

Lisa Pelling of the Stockholm-based Arena Idé think tank wrote in 2019 of the impact of this on the top 10 percent of society: "Today, the Swedish face of inequality rests on a person whose everyday life is spent on what is in many ways a different planet. It is someone who no longer has to cook, wash the dishes or carry groceries—whose shirts are washed and ironed by paid (and tax-deductible) labour. The face of inequality is a person who can afford to take a mortgage on not just one home but a second one too, and who gets a tax rebate for having his or her often spacious dwellings cleaned and maintained. It is a person who—without having to pay a tuition fee—can send his or her kids to socially segregated schools, where well-prepared, motivated children are taught by the best-prepared teachers. It is a person who qualifies for private health insurance, which makes it possible to jump the queue for examinations and treatments—also at tax-funded clinics and hospitals."

As the government fails to protect human lives, this growing social divide is fuelling popular opposition to the entire political establishment. Despite efforts by media outlets to portray Sweden as united behind the government's irresponsible refusal to order a lockdown to contain the spread of coronavirus, the reality is very different. A recent poll found that just 51 percent of respondents approve of the government's handling of the pandemic—a figure that drops to 40 percent among those under 30 years of age.



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