

THE EPOCH TIMES

PREMIUM

VIEWPOINTS

The New York Times Finally Warms to Sweden's Pandemic Response—Three Years Later



People have lunch at a restaurant in Stockholm, Sweden, on April 22, 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic. (Jonathan Nackstrand/AFP via Getty Images)



By [Jonathan Miltimore](#)

April 7, 2023

Updated: April 7, 2023



Print

Commentary

Last week The New York Times published an article that would have been unthinkable a few years ago.

“How Did No-Mandate Sweden End Up With Such an Average Pandemic?” the headline asked.

Times writer David Wallace-Wells doesn't accept claims that Sweden—which drew intense criticism for refusing to go into lockdown in 2020—had the lowest excess death rate in Europe, with just 3.3 percent more deaths than expected, the lowest percentage among OECD countries. But he does concede that “it's hard to argue on the basis of Sweden's epidemiological experience that its policy course was a disastrous one.”

This might not sound like much of a concession, but it is.

The Grey Lady reported in 2020 that “Sweden Has Become the World’s Cautionary Tale” for its COVID response, and the NY Times was joined by a chorus of media outlets (and President Donald Trump) who alleged Sweden had “botched the pandemic” and amplified the virus.

Today we know this wasn’t the case. And though Wallace-Wells seems to begrudge Anders Tegnell—the architect of Sweden’s policy—taking a “victory lap through the media,” it’s worth pointing out that the epidemiologist received death threats for his pandemic response, which looks better with each passing week.

Just how successful Sweden's approach was is still subject to debate. While Wallace-Wells is skeptical of Swedish claims that the country had the lowest excess mortality in Europe—he says the data set is imperfect and isn't adjusted for demographics—it's clear Sweden performed better than many lockdown nations. World Health Organization data he references show Swedes had an excess death rate average of 56 out of 100,000—far better than Italy (133), Germany (116), Spain (111), and the UK (109).

Whatever data one chooses, one fact is undebatable: This isn't what modelers predicted.

It's important to remember that one of the reasons nations went into lockdown in the first place was that Imperial College London predicted as many as 40 million people would die in nine months if the virus was left unchecked. Those same modelers predicted that Sweden would suffer 96,000 deaths by July 2020 if the nation didn't close.

That didn't happen. (The actual death count by July 2020 was 5,700.)

So whether one accepts claims that Sweden had the lowest excess death toll in Europe or merely performed “averagely,” it’s clear modelers were horribly wrong.

While Wallace-Wells doesn’t address these modeling errors, he does highlight the ineffectiveness of government regulations, conceding that “mandates may matter somewhat less than social behavior and the disease itself—and surely less than we want to believe.”

People will continue to debate mandates, of course. They’ll point out that countries such as Finland and Norway had lower COVID mortality than Sweden, ignoring that (as Wallace-Wells also notes) these countries actually had policies less stringent than Sweden for much of 2020, according to Oxford’s Coronavirus Government Response Tracker. (Neighbors were apparently quick to adopt Sweden’s “lighter touch” approach.)

This doesn't mean we don't have clear answers, however. Early in the pandemic, I asked a proactive question: "Could Sweden's laissez-faire approach to the coronavirus actually work?"

Though Wallace-Wells never quite says yes, he includes a telling quote from Francois Balloux, the director of the UCL Genetics Institute and a professor of computational biology at University College London.

"What the 'Swedish model' really suggests is that pandemic mitigation measures can be effectively deployed in a respectful, largely non-coercive way," writes Balloux.

This is as close to an admission of "Sorry, we were wrong" as we're likely to see in the New York Times.

After all, the non-coercive measures Balloux mentions are precisely what proponents of Sweden's approach, including signers of the Great Barrington Declaration, had advocated all along. (Wallace-Wells is correct when he notes that Sweden never adopted a "let it rip" approach, as many claim.)

Sadly, most countries instead adopted highly coercive measures, even tyrannical ones, believing they had the knowledge to plan society. In doing so, they ignored the warning of Nobel Prize-winning economist F.A. Hayek, who cautioned that “if man is not to do more harm than good in his efforts to improve the social order, he will have to learn that in this, as in all other fields where essential complexity of an organized kind prevails, he cannot acquire the full knowledge which would make mastery of events possible.”

This is the biggest lesson of the pandemic: Central planners don't possess the knowledge to effectively organize society, but they do possess the power to wreck the social order—quickly. This is precisely why Hayek said it was imperative that those with power approach society with humility.

Some people appear to have learned this lesson. Wallace-Wells said it's “humbling to acknowledge” that mandates simply were unable to do what many believed they could.

Let's hope others learn this lesson as well—and offer the Swedes and Dr. Tegnell a well-deserved apology.

Views expressed in this article are the opinions of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Epoch Times.

RELATED TOPICS

sweden covid response