

Sweden Now Has a Lower COVID-19 Death Rate than the US. Here's Why It Matters

Sweden's "lighter touch" COVID-19 strategy looks stronger with every passing week.

By [Jon Miltimore](#)

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For months, Sweden was the punching bag of the world's media and politicians.

For foregoing a lockdown, Sweden was declared a "[cautionary tale](#)" by The New York Times.

"Sweden is paying heavily for its decision not to lockdown," President Trump [tweeted](#).

"They are leading us to catastrophe," [said](#) The Guardian in March, quoting a virus immunology researcher.

Experts and media around the world all seemed to agree, with a few [notable exceptions](#), that lockdowns were the sound approach to the COVID-19 pandemic.

There's been much less talk about Sweden of late. The reason, it would seem, is that Sweden's strategy appears to have tamed the virus. While countries around the world are experiencing a resurgence of COVID-19 outbreaks, Sweden's COVID-19 deaths have slowed to a crawl.

As a result, many nations are catching up to Sweden in per capita deaths, and some are passing it. Italy recently popped back ahead of Sweden. Chile passed the Swedes next. Then came Brazil, which surpassed Sweden in per capita deaths on Wednesday.

Finally, on Thursday, the United States joined the group. The United States currently has 578 COVID-19 deaths per million compared to Sweden's 577 per million, [according to](#) the global statistics web site Worldometers.

[#Sweden](#) fell below Chile and Brazil in [#Covid_19](#) deaths per capita this week. Today they pass the US.

With every passing week the Swedish strategy looks stronger.

The lockdowns failed. pic.twitter.com/iXz6LbAfPx

— Jon Miltimore (Parler: @Miltimore79) (@miltimore79) [September 4, 2020](#)

More nations are likely to follow in the weeks and months ahead.

Meanwhile, the man behind Sweden's herd immunity strategy, Johan Giesecke, just got by [promoted](#) by the World Health Organization.

The Lockdown Lesson

State-enforced lockdowns have ravaged economies and humans alike. Stay-at-home orders caused a massive decline in economic output and caused serious disruptions to the global supply chain. Tens [of millions of jobs](#) were lost, millions of businesses were shuttered, and [extreme global poverty](#) increased for the first time in more than two decades. Meanwhile, countries witnessed surges in [drug overdoses](#), [suicide](#), [domestic violence](#), and [depression](#).

For months, media, policy experts, and politicians claimed that these unintended consequences were necessary collateral damage in the war against COVID-19 (when they acknowledged them at all).

"Scientists say lockdowns have likely prevented hundreds of millions of infections around the world," CNN [reported](#) in June. "A modeling study published in the scientific journal Nature last month estimated that by early April, shutdown policies saved 285 million people in China from getting infected, 49 million in Italy and 60 million in the US."

Professor Solomon Hsiang, the director of the Global Policy Laboratory at Berkeley, called lockdowns one of the greatest endeavors ever taken by humans.

"I don't think any human endeavor has ever saved so many lives in such a short period of time," said Hsiang. "There have been huge personal costs to staying home and canceling events, but the data show that each day made a profound difference."

Recently published research appears to blow a hole in this thesis.

In a new *Wall Street Journal* article titled "The Failed Lockdown Experiment," Donald L. Luskin, the chief investment officer of TrendMacro, a global investment strategy consulting firm, [says](#) data show lockdowns are actually correlated with a greater spread of the virus.

"TrendMacro, my analytics firm, tallied the cumulative number of reported cases of Covid-19 in each state and the District of Columbia as a percentage of population, based on data from state and local health departments aggregated by the Covid Tracking Project. We then compared that with the timing and intensity of the lockdown in each jurisdiction. That is measured not by the mandates put in place by government officials, but rather by observing what people in each jurisdiction actually did, along with their baseline behavior before the lockdowns. This is captured in highly detailed anonymized cellphone tracking data provided by Google and others and tabulated by the University of Maryland's Transportation Institute into a "Social Distancing Index."

Measuring from the start of the year to each state's point of maximum lockdown—which range from April 5 to April 18—it turns out that lockdowns correlated with a greater spread of the virus. States with longer, stricter lockdowns also had larger Covid outbreaks. The five places with the harshest

lockdowns—the District of Columbia, New York, Michigan, New Jersey and Massachusetts—had the heaviest caseloads.

It could be that strict lockdowns were imposed as a response to already severe outbreaks. But the surprising negative correlation, while statistically weak, persists even when excluding states with the heaviest caseloads. And it makes no difference if the analysis includes other potential explanatory factors such as population density, age, ethnicity, prevalence of nursing homes, general health or temperature. The only factor that seems to make a demonstrable difference is the intensity of mass-transit use.”

The efficacy of lockdowns (or the lack thereof) will likely be a subject of debate for years.

What’s clear is that COVID-19 is [not as deadly](#) as researchers originally thought and nations and states that did not lockdown did not see an explosion of deaths and cases (though they suffered [far less economic destruction](#)).

The fact that Sweden did not lockdown and now has fewer deaths per capita than the US, which did experience economic lockdowns in most of the country, doesn’t prove that lockdowns don’t work. Just like the fact that Sweden had more deaths than Scandinavian neighbors like Finland and Norway doesn’t prove that lockdowns saved lives.

It’s simply more evidence that the correlation between lockdowns and COVID-19 deaths is extremely weak. And to the extent a correlation exists, it’s actually negative.

Indeed, if you subtract three lockdown states from the US totals—New Jersey, New York, and Massachusetts, which account for 31 percent of all COVID-19 deaths in the US—the United States’s numbers suddenly plummet to 399 per million, below Bolivia and slightly above Columbia.

The year 2020 will go down in history as a historic calamity. But this was not because COVID-19 struck (deadly respiratory viruses have existed as long as humans have), but because central planners erroneously believed the best way to protect humanity from an invisible respiratory virus was to order healthy people to remain in their homes under almost all conditions, in many cases under threat of fine or imprisonment.

Planners made the fatal mistake of ignoring F.A. Hayek’s [famous advice](#), delivered in his 1974 Nobel Prize-winning speech, to act humbly with their awesome power.

“The curious task of economics is to demonstrate to men how little they really know about what they imagine they can design,” Hayek later wrote in [The Fatal Conceit](#). “To the naive mind that can conceive of order only as the product of deliberate arrangement, it may seem absurd that in complex conditions order, and adaptation to the unknown, can be achieved more effectively by decentralizing decisions and that a division of authority will actually extend the possibility of overall order. Yet that decentralization actually leads to more information being taken into account.”

The results of lockdowns have indeed been fatal. But it’s not too late to learn the truth of Hayek’s important lesson.

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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.

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