

OP-ED

Here's Why No One Wants to Talk About Sweden



BY JOHAN ANDERBERG · APRIL 19, 2022 · 6 MINUTE READ



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When, the summer before last, the results of the first Covid wave began to be tallied in the media, there were different ways of measuring the devastation. One way of looking at the pandemic was to focus on how many people died — more than half a million around the world by the end of June. Another was to try assessing the complicated impacts of the various measures taken to combat the virus. When [a lot of the functions](#) in society were frozen, people struggled — especially the most vulnerable.

For those who preferred the first perspective, there was plenty of data to lean on. Meticulous records of the death toll were being kept in most countries, especially the wealthy ones, and presented in stylish graphs on various sites: the Johns Hopkins University website, Worldometer, Our World in Data.

It was a lot harder to measure the consequences of the lockdowns. They appeared here and there as scattered anecdotes and figures. Perhaps the most striking data point came from the US: by the end of the academic year, a total of 55.1 million students had been affected by school closures.

But still, the death toll was more interesting. In early summer, *The New York Times* had published a front page completely devoid of pictures. Instead, it contained a [long list of people who had died](#): a thousand names, followed by their age, location, and a very brief description. “Alan Lund, 81, Washington, conductor with ‘the most amazing ear’”; “Harvey Bayard, 88, New York, grew up directly across the street from the old Yankee Stadium”. And so on.

It was *The New York Times*'s national editor who had noticed that the US death toll was about to pass 100,000, and so wanted to create something memorable — something you could look back on in 100 years to understand what society was going through. The front page was reminiscent of what a newspaper might look like during a bloody war. It brought to mind the way American TV stations had reported the names of fallen soldiers at the end of every day

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The idea spread quickly across the world. A few weeks later, in Sweden, the front page of *Dagens Nyheter* was covered with 49 colour photographs below the words: “One Day, 118 Lives.” Those 118 people had passed away on 15 April. It was the highest daily death toll recorded throughout the Spring. Since then, it had steadily been falling.

When [the epidemiologist Johan Giesecke](#) read the paper, it left him a little puzzled. *On any normal day, 275 people die in Sweden*, he thought. He'd spent a large part of his life studying just that: where, when, and how people die. The way the world currently thought about death was, to him, completely alien. When he'd taken part in an online conference in Johannesburg, one participant had pointed out that, in that year alone, more than 2 million people had died of hunger in the world. During the same period, Covid-19 had claimed between 200,000 and 300,000 lives.

Giesecke felt as though the world was going through a [self-inflicted global disaster](#). If things had simply been left to run their course, it would have been over by now. Instead, millions of children were being deprived of their education. In some countries, they weren't even allowed to go to playgrounds. From Spain came stories of parents sneaking down into parking garages with their children to let them run around.

Tens of thousands of surgeries had been postponed by healthcare services. Screenings for everything from cervical to prostate cancer were put on ice. This wasn't just happening in other countries. Sweden had seen its fair share of peculiar decisions, too. The Swedish police hadn't tested drivers for insobriety for months, out of fear of the virus. This year, it didn't seem quite as serious if someone were to get killed by a drunk driver.

It was becoming obvious that the media, the politicians, and the public had a hard time assessing the risks of the new virus. To most people, the figures didn't mean anything. But then came the health commission's warning...

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overwhelmed in several countries. They heard the testimonies from nurses and doctors.

Here and there in the world — in Germany, the UK, Ecuador — people had been [taking to the streets](#) to protest the rules, laws, and decrees curtailing their lives. From other countries came reports that people were starting to flout the restrictions. But the force of the resistance remained weaker than Giesecke had expected. There had been no French revolution, no global backlash.

One explanation for the citizens' passivity might have been the coverage of the deadliness of the virus in the media; it seemed they had been fed a non-contextualised picture of how serious the Covid-19 pandemic really was. During the Spring and Summer, the global consultancy firm Kekst CNC had asked people in five big democracies — the UK, Germany, France, the US, and Japan — about all kinds of things relating to the virus and society. The sixth country in the survey was Sweden. Sweden was a lot smaller than the other countries, but was included due to the unique path it was taking through the pandemic.

The questions were about everything, ranging from people's opinions on actions taken by the authorities, to the state of the job market, and on whether they thought their governments were providing sufficient support to trade and industry. The twelfth and final topic in the survey contained two questions: "How many people in your country have had the coronavirus? How many people in your country have died?" At the same time as increasingly reliable figures were trickling in with regard to the actual deadliness of Covid-19, there was now a study of the number that people *believed* had died.

In the US, the average guess in mid-July was that 9% of the population had died. If that had been true, it would have corresponded to almost 30 million American deaths. The death toll from the coronavirus had been 22,500 by July 2021.

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exaggerated a hundredfold. The Swedish guess of 6% would have corresponded to 600,000 deaths in the country. By then, the official death toll was more than 5,000 and inching closer to 6,000.

Reporting the average guess was perhaps a little misrepresentative, as some people replied with very high numbers. In the UK, the most common answer was that around 1% of the population had died — in other words, a lot less than the 7% average. But it was still a figure that overestimated the number of deaths more than tenfold. At this point, 44,000 Brits had been registered dead — or around 0.07% of the population.

The breakdown of the numbers further showed that more than a third of the Brits responded with a figure of over 5% of the population. This would have been like the whole population of Wales dropping dead. It would have meant many times more Brits dying of Covid-19 than during the entire Second World War — civilian and military casualties included.

The war rhetoric brandished by the leaders of the world had had an impact. Their citizens really did believe they were living through a war. Then, two years into the pandemic, the war ended. There were no longer any foreign journalists at the Swedish Public Health Agency's press conferences. No Americans, Brits, Germans, or Danes asked why schools were staying open, or why the country hadn't gone into lockdown.

In large part, this was because the rest of the world had quietly begun to live with the new virus. Most of the world's politicians had given up hope on both lockdowns and school closures. And yet, considering all those articles and TV segments that had been produced about Sweden's foolishly libertarian attitude to the pandemic, considering the way some data sources had been referenced daily by the world's media, this sudden lack of interest was strange.

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For anyone still interested, the results [were impossible to deny](#). By the end of 2021, 56 countries had registered more deaths per capita from Covid-19 than Sweden. With regard to the restrictions that the rest of the world had put so much faith in — school closures, lockdowns, face masks, mass testing — Sweden had more or less gone in the opposite direction. Yet its results were not noticeably different from those of other countries. It was beginning to become increasingly clear that the political measures that had been deployed against the virus were of limited value. But no one spoke about this.

From a human perspective, it was easy to understand why so many were reluctant to face the numbers from Sweden. For the inevitable conclusion must be that millions of people had been denied their freedom, and millions of children had had their education disrupted, all for nothing.

Who would want to be complicit in that?

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