

Sweden records deadliest November since 1918 Spanish flu pandemic

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Sweden recorded last month its deadliest November since the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918. With 8,088 deaths registered in the country, the excess mortality was 10 percent compared to average deaths in the same month between 2015 and 2019, according to Statistics Sweden.

These figures are a damning indictment of the ruling elite's criminal response to the coronavirus pandemic, which has consisted of a refusal to take any serious measures to curb the spread of the disease. Sweden's Social Democrat-led government's refusal to impose even the limited lockdowns enacted in other European countries, together with its decisions to keep primary and lower secondary schools open and place no restrictions on economic activity, has produced a disastrously high death total and brought the country's chronically underfunded health care system to the brink of collapse. Leading public health officials, including state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell, openly acknowledged in the spring that they were pursuing a policy of "herd immunity."

Last week, the official COVID-19 death toll in Sweden surpassed 8,000. In a country of just 10 million people, over 400,000 infections have been recorded. Around 100 people are dying on a daily basis, the equivalent of over 3,000 in the United States population. Conditions are especially dire in the Stockholm region, where ICU capacity is over 100 percent and nonessential treatments are being cancelled. Patients must now be transferred to other regions of the country, and the possibility of seeking help from neighbouring Finland and Norway is even being discussed.

Official figures indicate that large numbers of those infected never receive medical care. Just 3,815 people have received treatment in intensive care since the pandemic began, a figure that includes survivors and people who have died. In other words, only a fraction of the 8,167 people confirmed to have died from coronavirus as of December 22 received intensive care treatment.

The denial of care to certain sections of the population, especially those in care homes, has been even more dramatic. According to a report released earlier this month by the health and social care inspectorate, one in 20 suspected COVID-19 patients in some regions physically saw a doctor. Other regions issued explicit instructions denying all hospital care to care home residents for any illness or injury.

The crisis in the health system is compounded by the exodus of nurses and other health care professionals triggered by appalling working conditions. According to a survey by broadcaster TV4, nurses are leaving the profession in record numbers across the country. Resignations are up in 13 out of Sweden's 21 regions compared to a year ago, reaching up to 500 a month. A report by Swedish Radio revealed that all of the country's regional university hospitals, apart from Norrland University Hospital in the far north, no longer have adequate staffing levels to provide care to all COVID-19 patients.

In a desperate attempt to locate staff to treat ICU patients, authorities in Stockholm announced the redeployment of 100 staff from a children's hospital to work in ICUs.

Sineva Ribeiro, head of the Swedish Association of Health Care Professionals, told Bloomberg that the crisis facing hospitals is "unprecedented." The main challenge is no longer ICU beds but finding the staff to provide an adequate level of patient care. "In a work environment where you are so tired, the risk of mistakes increases," she said. "And those mistakes can lead to patients dying."

The mass death produced by the ruling elite's policies will result in the largest decline in life expectancy in Sweden since 1944, according to separate figures from Statistics Sweden released in late November. Life expectancy for women will fall from 84.7 last year to 84.4 by the end of 2020, and from 81.2 to 80.7 for men.

Researchers warned that these staggering declines in just one year could prove to be even larger, since the number of deaths for the months September to December were estimates based on data from previous years.

While the Social Democrat/Green government's reckless policies enjoyed the support of the entire political establishment from the outset, popular anger is mounting. This has been further fuelled by the release of the official coronavirus commission's initial report, which sharply criticised the government's poor handling of the pandemic and pointed to "structural" problems caused by decades of austerity and privatisation as being responsible for the disaster. Prime Minister Stefan Löfven was forced to appoint the commission, which is led by Mats Melin, a former judge on Sweden's top administrative court, after the government's failure to protect elderly residents in care homes provoked widespread outrage.

The commission wrote in its preliminary report released December 14, "Apart from the general spread of the virus in society, the factor that has had the greatest impact on the number of cases of illness and deaths from COVID-19 in Swedish residential care is structural shortcomings that have been well-known for a long time. These shortcomings have led to residential care being unprepared and ill-equipped to handle a pandemic. Staff employed in the elderly care sector were largely left by themselves to tackle the crisis."

The commission noted that one of the shortcomings was the widespread use of zero hours contracts, which forced low-paid and precariously employed care staff to continue coming to work, even if they felt sick, for fear of losing their job. In addition, it criticised low staffing levels, an issue raised by the World Health Organisation prior to the pandemic, and the failure to supply adequate levels of personal protective equipment (PPE). Even though two government agencies acknowledged in early February that problems existed in securing adequate quantities of PPE, the National Board of Health and Welfare only began compiling an overview of the situation in Sweden's 290 municipalities in April, when the virus was already running rampant.

In unusually sharp terms for a bureaucratic report, the commission placed ultimate responsibility for the catastrophic response on successive governments of all political stripes. "The ultimate responsibility for these shortcomings rests with the government in power—and with the previous governments that also possessed this information [about structural shortcomings in elderly care]," wrote the commission, which is not due to present

a more comprehensive report on all aspects of the pandemic response until early 2022.

The right-wing opposition Moderate and Christian Democrat parties, together with the far-right Sweden Democrats, have seized on the commission's report to intensify pressure on Löfven's minority Social Democrat/Green coalition. Despite having fully endorsed the rejection of lockdowns and other measures to contain the virus, Moderate leader Ulf Kristersson has attacked the government for delays with testing, the provision of PPE, and contact tracing. Figures within the Moderates are calling for resignations, including by Health Minister Lena Hallengren.

Löfven, whose government relies on support from the Centre and Liberal parties for a parliamentary majority, declared last Friday that he has full confidence in Hallengren and suggested that the opposition parties could table a vote of no confidence in his government.

However the immediate political crisis develops, it is clear that the entire political establishment is complicit in Sweden's disastrous pandemic response. Successive Social Democrat- and Moderate-led governments have systematically cut spending for health care, social services and education, while privatising large chunks of Sweden's once much-vaunted public services. Under Prime Minister Göran Persson from the mid-1990s to 2006, the Social Democrat government relied on the support of the ex-Stalinist Left Party to carry through this agenda, which paved the way for Moderate Prime Minister Frederick Reinfeldt to launch a sweeping privatisation drive and major tax cuts when his right-wing Alliance government took power in 2006.

Löfven, who returned the Social Democrats to power in 2014, has continued the rightward shift within Swedish politics, including by imposing drastic hikes in military spending while starving health care and critical social services. The Social Democrat/Green coalition is kept in power by the votes of the Left Party, which occasionally issues hypocritical attacks on the government's right-wing policies while continuing to provide the votes necessary to keep the Social Democrats and Greens in power.



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