

Stockholm syndrome revisited: As Sweden's COVID rate flattens and masks disappear, experts ponder 'no lockdown' blueprint

Normalcy has never been more contentious than in Sweden. Almost alone in the Western world, the Swedes refused to impose a coronavirus lockdown last spring, as the country's leading health officials argued that limited restrictions were sufficient and would better protect against economic collapse.

It was an approach that transformed Sweden into an unlikely ideological lightning rod. Many scientists blamed it for a spike in deaths, even as many libertarians critical of lockdowns portrayed Sweden as a model. During a recent Senate hearing in Washington, Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, the leading U.S. infectious disease specialist, and Senator Rand Paul, Republican of Kentucky, angrily clashed over Sweden.

For their part, the Swedes admit to making some mistakes, particularly in nursing homes, where the death toll was staggering. Indeed, comparative analyses show that Sweden's death rate at the height of the pandemic in the spring far surpassed the rates in neighboring countries and was more protracted.

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Now, though, the question is whether the country's current low caseload, compared with sharp increases elsewhere, shows that it has found a sustainable balance, something that all Western countries are seeking eight months into the pandemic — or whether the recent numbers are just a temporary aberration.

"It looks positive," said Anders Tegnell, Sweden's state epidemiologist, who gained global fame and notoriety for having kept Sweden out of lockdown in March.

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