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WHO Official: Sweden's Policy of Individual Responsibility "a Model" for the Rest of World

Dr. Mike Ryan, the WHO's top emergencies expert, said Sweden's social distancing policies are often misunderstood by the public.

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Image Credit: New York Post



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The World Health Organization (WHO) this week praised Sweden as a potential “model” for battling the COVID-19 virus sweeping nations around the world.

Sweden, unlike most other nations, has avoided the hardline approach to the novel coronavirus pandemic that has resulted in mass economic shutdowns and [vast unemployment](#). Bars, restaurants, libraries, public pools, and most schools remain open in the nation of 10 million, which has [drawn fire](#) from critics skeptical of the state’s “laissez-faire” approach.

On Wednesday, however, the WHO’s top emergencies expert said Sweden’s social distancing policies are often misunderstood.

“I think there’s a perception out that Sweden has not put in control measures and just has allowed the disease to spread,” Dr. Mike Ryan [told](#) reporters. “Nothing can be further from the truth.”

Ryan said the biggest difference between Sweden and most nations is that the Swedes are encouraging voluntary participation with its citizens while focusing government resources on at risk populations.

“What it has done differently is it has very much relied on its relationship with its citizenry and the ability and willingness of its citizens to implement self-distancing and self-regulate,” Ryan said. “In that sense, they have implemented public policy through that partnership with the population.”

Partnership is the key word. Sweden isn't simply issuing sweeping orders and fining or arresting those who disobey. Instead, Swedish leaders are seeking to work in cooperation with its citizenry. They are giving them information and asking them to behave responsibly.

As my colleague Dan Sanchez [pointed out](#) last week, this approach once was part of the fiber of the American system.

“Measures based on individual responsibility used to be part of the American model, too, as codified in the Bill of Rights. Yet we have developed a culture of reflexively giving up that responsibility and those rights whenever we get scared: of terrorists, of economic hardship, of a virus.”

Many seem to believe that voluntary actions are somehow less effective than government dictates, but this is simply not true. Human cooperation and voluntary action are essential ingredients to a vibrant, prosperous culture.

“The hallmark of civil society is cooperation, which is what we should all be thinking about at times like these. The coronavirus defines our collective life at present, but cooperation defines our collective life as a rule. Always,” [write](#) economist Ant Davies and political scientist James Harrigan. “When our knee-jerk

reaction to immediate problems is to coerce, as is so often the case, we push the obvious solutions to our problems into the background. And still, people cooperate.”

It’s a lesson we’ve simply forgotten. As the economic destruction from our latest collective panic grows, we are seeing the price of our impulse to use raw government force as a means to an end. In the US alone, 30 million people have filed for unemployment. Food production and distribution is being disrupted; slaughterhouses [are closing](#) and stocks are being [euthanized](#). The costs, in the US and around the globe, will be severe.

Sweden, on the other hand, has avoided some of the economic destruction other countries are facing, though like its neighbors, the nation is still [projecting a contraction in GDP](#) and increased unemployment. Importantly, however, Sweden is also wildly outperforming models predicting COVID-19 deaths. [A recent study](#) predicted that “current Swedish public-health strategy will result in a peak intensive-care load in May that exceeds pre-pandemic capacity by over 40-fold, with a median mortality of 96,000.”

As we head into May, Sweden’s COVID-19 death toll stands just over 2,500. Hospitals are not being overrun. Meanwhile Anders Tegnell, Sweden’s top epidemiologist and the architect of its COVID-19 response, [tells USA Today](#) that its capital is nearing herd immunity.

“We think that up to 25% people in Stockholm have been exposed to coronavirus and are possibly immune,” said Tegnell. “A recent survey from one of our hospitals in Stockholm found that 27% of staff there are immune. We could reach herd immunity in Stockholm within a matter of weeks.”

Sweden’s results speak for themselves, which is no doubt why the WHO this week touted the Scandinavian country as “a model” for the rest of the world as humans seek to return to normalcy.

“I think if we are to reach a new normal, Sweden represents a model if we wish to get back to a society in which we don’t have lockdowns,” Ryan told reporters.

This is not to say Sweden’s approach is without costs or tradeoffs. Nothing in life is. While Sweden’s per capita death toll is better than most of its European neighbors—France, the UK, Belgium, Italy, Spain, and the Netherlands, among them—it also has a higher per capita fatality rate than its Scandinavian neighbors, Norway and Finland. It’s even possible that Sweden will reach the dire morbidity projections of the modelers, though highly unlikely.

Whatever the future holds, the world owes Sweden thanks. The Swedes have shown us a better way. They’ve reminded us that the proper role of the state is to inform individuals and work with them, to seek voluntary action and cooperation instead of resorting to blunt force and edicts.

Perhaps most importantly, Sweden showed that viruses are medical problems, not political ones. When we start to see them as the latter, everyone loses.