

Sweden's no-lockdown COVID strategy was broadly correct, commission suggests

Sweden should have adopted tougher early measures and the government assumed clearer leadership as COVID-19 hit, though the mostly voluntary no-lockdown strategy was broadly correct, a commission reviewing the pandemic response said on Friday.



A medical staffer at Sophiahemmet hospital in Stockholm stands at the entrance of a tent for testing and receiving potential COVID-19 patients on April 7, 2020, one of the most deadly months in the pandemic for Sweden.

(Jonathan Nackstrand/AFP/Getty Images)

Sweden should have adopted tougher early measures and the government

assumed clearer leadership as COVID-19 hit, though the mostly voluntary no-lockdown strategy was broadly correct, a commission reviewing the country's pandemic response said on Friday.

Sweden polarized opinion at home and abroad with its handling of the pandemic, opting against the lockdowns implemented by many countries and adopting a largely voluntary approach of promoting social distancing and good hygiene.

The commission — set up by the government under pressure from parliament — said Sweden's broad policy was "fundamentally correct."

"It meant that citizens retained more of their personal freedom than in many other countries," the report says.

But the panel of eight experts, including professors of economics and political science, said the government should have taken clearer leadership and acted sooner when it comes to measures such as capacity limits and masks.

"The Government should have assumed leadership of all aspects of crisis management from the outset," the commission said in the report. It found the government had too one-sided a dependence on assessments made by the Public Health Agency.

"In February-March 2020, Sweden should have opted for more rigorous and intrusive disease prevention and control measures."

'Remarkable' delay in indoor caps cited

The findings could become a liability for the ruling Social Democrats with a general election due in September. More than 17,000 people have died from

or with COVID-19 in Sweden, far more per capita than among Nordic neighbours but less than in most European countries that opted for lockdowns.

Figures from statistics agency Eurostat showed the country had 7.7 per cent more deaths in 2020 than its average for the preceding four years, among the lowest excess mortality rates in Europe.

Young Swedes take a selfie outside the KB nightclub in Malmö early on Feb. 9, when Sweden lifted COVID-19 restrictions once again. (Johan Nilsson/AFP/Getty Images)

"In the light of current knowledge ... the Commission is not convinced that extended or recurring mandatory lockdowns, as introduced in other countries, are a necessary element in the response to a new, serious epidemic outbreak."

Moreover, the report argues the "right balance" was struck in terms of the education sector. Preschool and elementary schools were kept open, with universities and the equivalent of high schools switched to remote learning.

But a number of criticisms were levelled at the central government and its main public health agency, including in areas concerning preparedness and unclear jurisdictional lines.

"In a crisis, there must be no uncertainty about who is in charge," the experts wrote.

Read the commission report summary: [Mobile users: View the document \(PDF KB\)](#).

[\(Text KB\)](#). *CBC is not responsible for 3rd party content*

Faults were found particularly in the early weeks of the pandemic. Unlike many developed and Western nations, Sweden did not order temporary

closures of many indoor spaces in early or mid-March 2020, dogged in part by questions whether there was a legal or legislative basis to do so.

The commission said it was "remarkable that it took until 29 March 2020 for the limit on public gatherings and events to be lowered to 50 people."

In April, the country's daily pandemic reports were regularly advising of triple-digit COVID death totals.

Recently shed Omicron-related restrictions

In January 2021, Sweden experienced another very significant coronavirus wave. The commission said more could have been done in the fall of 2020 to prepare for that possibility, which scientific experts had warned about for countries in the Northern Hemisphere.

"The Public Health Agency should not have dismissed the use of masks as a disease prevention and control measure in indoor settings and on public transport," the commission said.

Sweden made some adjustments in early January to its approach in light of the Omicron variant's sweep across much of the world, but earlier this month said they were no longer needed. Restaurants and bars are now open, with no time or capacity limits.

The country's health agency said it was scrapping large-scale testing, as it was deemed too expensive in relation to the benefits. Sweden spent the equivalent of about \$67 million Cdn per week on testing for the first five weeks of this year and around \$3 billion since the start of the pandemic.