

# Man Behind Sweden's Controversial Virus Strategy Admits Mistakes

By

Rafaela Lindeberg

June 3, 2020, 8:25 AM GMT+2 *Updated on June 3, 2020, 12:31 PM GMT+2*



Anders Tegnell Photographer: Pontus Lundahl/AFP via Getty Images

[LISTEN TO ARTICLE](#)

2:54

[SHARE THIS ARTICLE](#)

[Sign up here](#) for our daily coronavirus newsletter on what you need to know, and [subscribe to our Covid-19 podcast](#) for the latest news and analysis.

Sweden's top epidemiologist has admitted his strategy to fight Covid-19 resulted in too many deaths, after persuading his country to avoid a strict lockdown.

"If we were to encounter the same illness with the same knowledge that we have today, I think our response would land somewhere in between what Sweden did and what the rest of the world has done," Anders Tegnell said in an [interview](#) with Swedish Radio.

Tegnell is the brains behind Sweden's controversial approach to fighting the virus, and the government of Stefan Lofven has deferred to the epidemiologist in its official response to the pandemic. Gatherings of more than 50 people continue to be banned, but throughout the crisis Swedes have been able to visit restaurants, go shopping, attend gyms and send children under 16 to school.

The laxer approach to containing the virus has drawn both praise and condemnation from across the globe. What is beyond debate, however, is the effect the strategy has had on the country's death toll.

At 43 deaths per 100,000, Sweden's mortality rate is among the [highest globally](#) and far exceeds that of neighboring Denmark and Norway, which imposed much tougher lockdowns at the onset of the pandemic.

"Clearly, there is potential for improvement in what we have done in Sweden," Tegnell said.

The comments appeared to frustrate some members of the government. Sweden's minister of health and social affairs, Lena Hallengren, said Tegnell "still can't give an exact answer on what other measures should have been taken. That question remains, I think," the minister said, according to Dagens Nyheter.

## **Falling Behind**

Until now, Tegnell had argued that the long-term nature of the Covid-19 pandemic required a more sustainable response than severe and sudden lockdowns. Despite criticism from abroad, Tegnell's strategy enjoyed widespread support in Sweden.

[Second U.S. Virus Wave Emerges With Texas Hitting Record](#)  
[Record Jump in Texas; WHO Warns on Latin America: Virus Update](#)  
[China Offers Shots to Workers Going Abroad Amid Vaccine Race](#)  
[New Jersey Deploys 900 Contact Tracers as State Pushes Reopening](#)

READ MORE FROM PROGNOSIS

-

But with many other European Union countries now rolling back their lockdowns after appearing to bring Covid-19 under control, there are signs that Sweden may be left behind. That includes the freedom of movement of its citizens, as some EU countries restrict access to people coming from what are deemed high-risk Covid zones.

What's more, there's so far limited evidence that Sweden's decision to leave much of its society open will support the economy. Finance Minister Magdalena Andersson recently warned that Sweden is facing its worst economic crisis since World War II, with GDP set to slump 7% in 2020, roughly as much as the rest of the EU.

The government has started to grow concerned at the apparent missteps taken to fight the spread of the virus in Sweden. On Monday, Lofven promised there'd be an inquiry into the handling of the crisis before the summer.

Some lawmakers in Sweden's parliament were quick to weigh in. Jimmie Akesson, the leader of the anti-immigration Sweden Democrats, tweeted that the comments by Tegnell are "astonishing."

"For months, critics have been consistently dismissed. Sweden has done everything right, the rest of the world has done it wrong. And now, suddenly, this," Akesson said.

(Adds comment from Sweden's health minister)

UP NEXT

## **Will There Be a Second Wave of Coronavirus in U.S.? Latest News**

[Have a confidential tip for our reporters?](#)  
[GET IN TOUCH](#)

Before it's here, it's on the Bloomberg Terminal.

LEARN MORE  
LIVE ON BLOOMBERG

Watch Live TV Listen to Live Radio

## Most Read

---

1. BUSINESS

---

[Second U.S. Virus Wave Emerges With Texas Hitting Record](#) updated 57 minutes ago

2. BUSINESS

---

[Expats Leaving Dubai Is Bad News for the Economy](#)

3. MARKETS

---

[Stocks Whipsaw, Dollar Drops on Powell's Dour View: Markets Wrap](#) updated 2 hours ago

4. BUSINESS

---

[23andMe Provides More Evidence That Blood Type Plays Role in Virus](#)

5. BUSINESS

---

[WHO Now Says Role of Silent Virus Spreaders Remains Unclear](#)

---

Texas on Wednesday reported 2,504 new coronavirus cases, the highest one-day total since the pandemic emerged.

A month into its reopening, Florida this week reported 8,553 new cases -- the most of any seven-day period.

California's hospitalizations are at their [highest since May 13](#) and have risen in nine of the past 10 days.

A fresh onslaught of the novel coronavirus is bringing challenges for residents and the economy in pockets across the U.S. The localized surges have raised alarms among experts even as they're masked by the nation's overall case count, which early this week rose just under 1%, the smallest increase since March.

"There is a new wave coming in parts of the country," said Eric Toner, a senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security. "It's small and it's distant so far, but it's coming."

Though the outbreaks come weeks into state reopenings, it's not clear that they're linked to increased economic activity. And health experts say it's still too soon to tell whether the massive protests against police brutality that have erupted in the past two weeks have led to more infections.

In Georgia, where hair salons, tattoo parlors and gyms have been operating for a month and a half, case numbers have plateaued, flummoxing experts.

Puzzling differences show up even within states. In California, which imposed a stay-at-home order in late March, San Francisco saw zero cases for three consecutive days this week, while Los Angeles County reported well over half of the state's new cases. The White House Coronavirus Task Force has yet to see any relationship between reopening and increased cases of Covid-19, Food and Drug Administration Commissioner Stephen Hahn said on a podcast.

But in some states, rising numbers outpace increases in testing, raising concerns about whether the virus can be controlled. It will take a couple of weeks to know, Toner said, but by then "it's going to be pretty late" to respond.

### QuickTake: Where Are We in Quest for Coronavirus Drugs, Vaccine?

Since the pandemic initially swept the U.S. starting early this year, almost 2 million people have been infected and more than 110,000 have died.

After a national shutdown that arrested the spread, rising illness had been expected as restrictions loosened. The trend has been observed across 22 states in recent weeks, though many increases are steady but slow.

In New York, the state hardest hit by Covid-19, Governor Andrew Cuomo only recently started reopening by region. New York City, the epicenter, began the first of four phases Monday.

"We know as a fact that reopening other states, we're seeing significant problems," Cuomo said Tuesday. "Just because you reopen does not mean you will have a spike, but if you are not smart, you can have a spike."

Experts see evidence of a second wave building in Arizona, Texas, Florida and California. Arizona “sticks out like a sore thumb in terms of a major problem,” said Jeffrey Morris, director of the division of biostatistics at University of Pennsylvania’s Perelman School of Medicine.

## **Arizona Spike**

Arizona’s daily tally of new cases has abruptly spiked in the last two weeks, hitting an all-time high of 1,187 on June 2.

This week, its Department of Health Services urged hospitals to activate emergency plans. Director Cara Christ, told a Phoenix television station that she was concerned about the rising case count and percentage of people tested who are found to be positive.

Valleywise Health, the public hospital system in Phoenix, has seen an increase in Covid-19 cases during the past two weeks. It’s expanded its intensive-care capacity and those beds are 87% full, about half with Covid patients, according to Michael White, the chief medical officer.

White said Valleywise has adequate protective gear for staff, but hospitals aren’t getting their entire orders. A surge in Covid cases could put that supply under stress, he said.

The increase in transmission follows steps to resume business and public life.

“Within Phoenix, we’ve been more relaxed than I’ve seen in some of the other parts of the country,” White said, with some people disregarding advice to wear masks and maintain six feet of distance from others. “People are coming together in environments where social distancing is challenging.”

Texas on Wednesday reported a 4.7% jump in hospitalizations to 2,153, the fourth consecutive daily increase. The latest figures showing an escalation came as Governor Greg Abbott tweeted a public service announcement featuring baseball legend Nolan Ryan urging Texans to wash their hands and to not be “a knucklehead.”

Abbott was criticized for an aggressive reopening last month. Mobile-phone data show activity by residents is rebounding toward pre-Covid levels, according to the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia's PolicyLab.

That could reflect a perception that the virus wasn't "ever a big threat," said Morris, who recently moved to Philadelphia after 20 years in Houston.

Florida's health department said in a statement that it attributes the increase in cases to "greatly expanded efforts in testing," and noted that overall positivity rates remain low, at about 5.5%.

Bucking the trend is Georgia, which was the first U.S. state to reopen. Covid cases there have plateaued. Despite local outbreaks in the state, "their sea levels did not rise," said David Rubin, director of the PolicyLab, which has been modeling the virus' spread. "They've kind of held this fragile equilibrium."

## **Creeping In**

California was the earliest state to shut down its economy over the coronavirus, after one of the nation's first outbreaks in the San Francisco Bay Area. It has been slower than most to reopen.

Even so, the state has also seen the number of people hospitalized with Covid-19 rebound in the past two weeks, as commerce accelerates. Case counts are climbing too, although officials attribute that to increased testing and say it's a sign of preparation.

In part, rising numbers represent the virus spreading into places that largely avoided the first round of infections, including rural Imperial County in California's southeastern desert. Yet the contagion remains present in places that bore the brunt of the first wave, including Los Angeles County. Hospitalizations there are lower than at the start of May, but deaths remain stubbornly high, with 500 in the past week alone.

Barbara Ferrer, Los Angeles County public health director, said the region has likely not seen the end of the first wave. And despite concerns about infections coming out of mass demonstrations in the sprawling city, she thinks the reopening of the economy will have a bigger impact.

“We’re not at the tail end of anything,” Ferrer said. “We never had a huge peak. We’ve kind of been within this band. We’re not in decline, we’re kind of holding our own in ways that protect the health-care system.” But, she added, “go to Venice and see the crowds, and you’ll understand why I have concerns.”

## **Another Onslaught**

The U.S. has long been bracing for another wave, but future outbreaks are likely to take a different shape. Social distancing and mask-wearing, as well as careful behavior by individuals, are likely to have staying power even as economies reopen.

Experts are steeling for autumn, when changes in weather and back-to-school plans could have damaging repercussions.

“The second wave isn’t going to mirror the first wave exactly,” said Lance Waller, a professor at Emory University’s Rollins School of Public Health in Atlanta. “It’s not snapping back to exactly the same thing as before, because we’re not exactly the way we were before.”

Daniel Lucey, a fellow at the Infectious Diseases Society of America, compared the virus’ new paradigm with a day at the beach: The U.S. has been bracing for another “high tide” like the one that engulfed New York City. Today is a low tide, but “the waves are always coming in.”

— With assistance by Nathan Crooks, Joe Carroll, Kristen V Brown, Shira Stein, Carlos M Rodriguez, Gabrielle Coppola, Stacie Sherman, and John Tozzi (Adds new Texas figures in first paragraph, Cuomo comments in 12th.)