

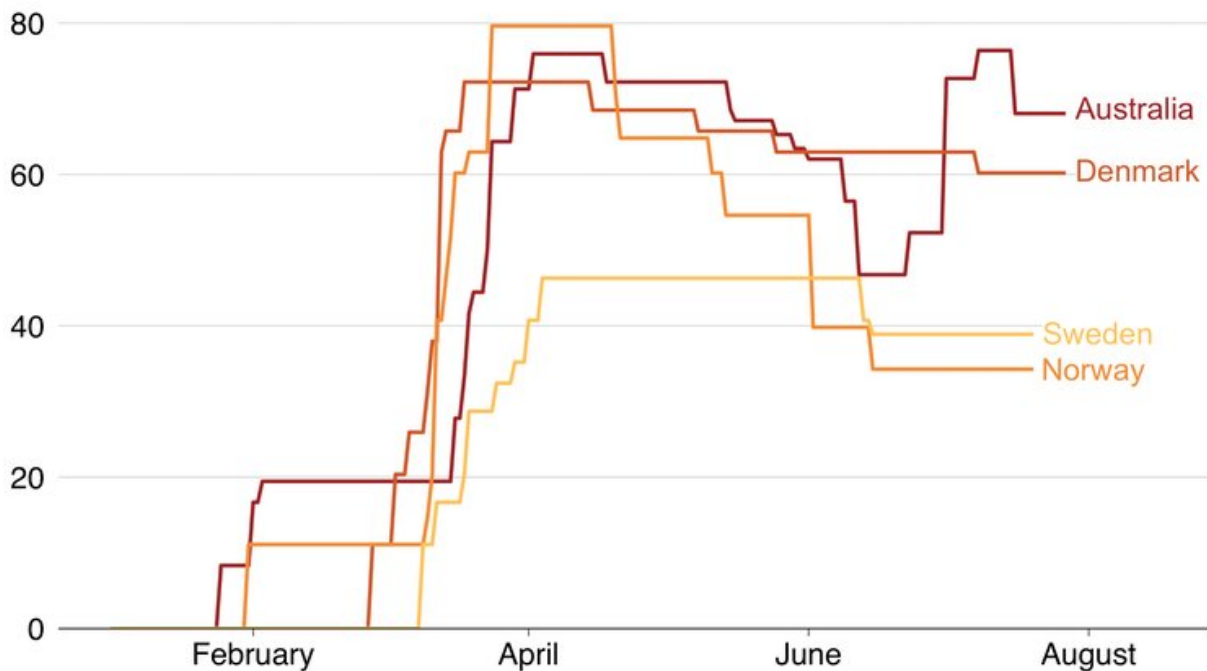
No, Australia should not follow Sweden's approach to coronavirus

July 29 2020, by Stephen Duckett, Will MacKey

Sweden's restrictions in March and April were light compared to their neighbours

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Oxford Stringency Index



Source: Oxford Stringency Index

Sweden's restrictions in March and April were light compared to its neighbours. Credit: Oxford

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought once-in-a-generation destruction to the lives and livelihoods of people around the world.

The costs of preventing the spread of COVID-19 must always be compared to the health, social and economic costs of viable alternatives. Countries across the globe have dealt with this balancing act differently.

One country in particular that has attracted attention for its lighter approach to lockdown is Sweden. Some people have [regarded](#) Sweden as an example for Australia to follow.

But Sweden shouldn't be seen as a model for Australia when it comes to COVID-19. The virus has [spread rapidly](#), they've had more deaths, and the [economy is suffering](#) just as badly as their neighbors with heavier lockdowns.

Sweden's approach was softer, but it wasn't unrestricted

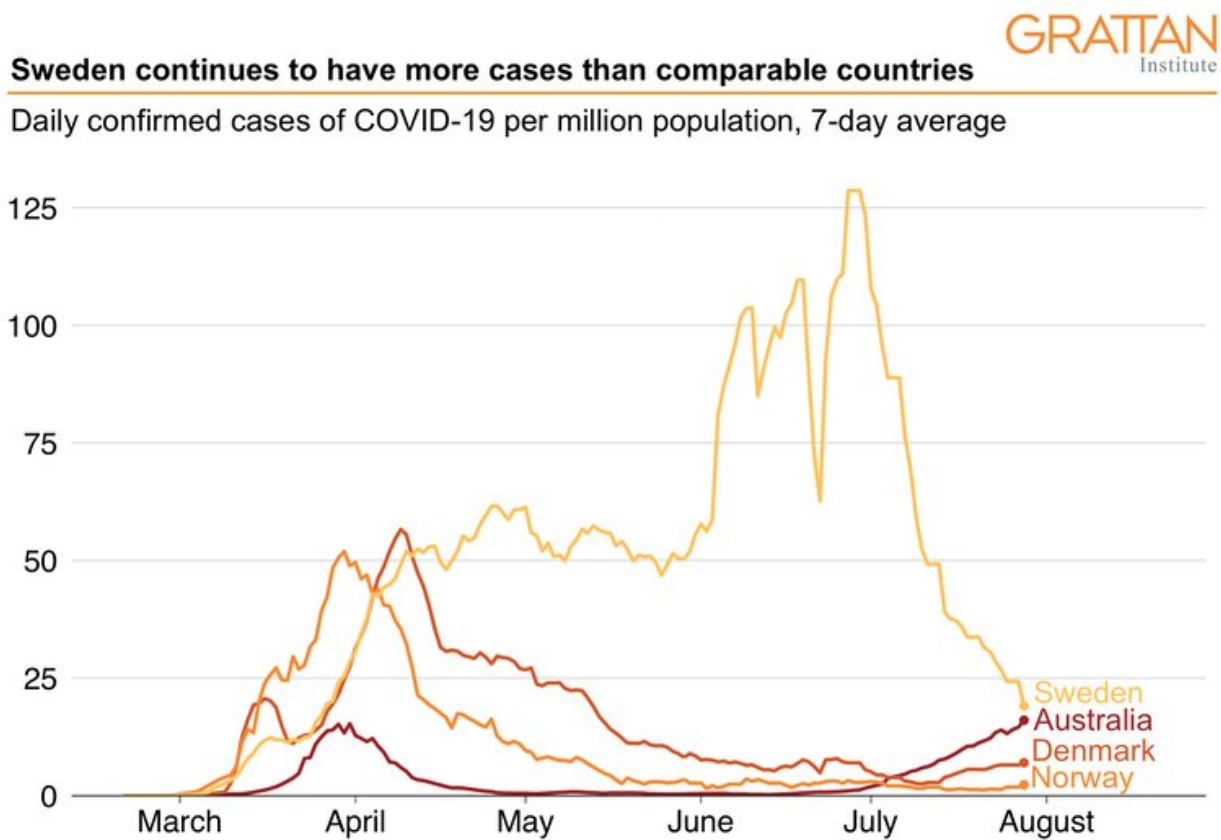
While some people called Sweden's approach a "let it rip" policy, this was never the case. Swedes were not free to go about their lives as normal.

Sweden's policymakers did introduce restrictions [to limit](#) the spread of COVID-19 infection, but they tried to do so in a way that minimized the effects on people and companies.

Bars and restaurants could remain open, but with capacity constraints and a requirement of table service. Schools were kept open to preschool and primary students, but were closed to senior students. Non-essential international arrivals were banned, but only from countries outside Europe.

There were social distancing requirements and protections for vulnerable populations. Visits to aged care facilities were prohibited. People over the age of 70, pregnant women, and those with pre-existing health conditions were encouraged to "[avoid social contacts](#)" and to ask others to do shopping and errands for them.

These [restrictions](#) and recommendations remain in place.



Source: Our World In Data (2020).

Sweden continues to have more cases than comparable countries. Credit: Our World In Data

High case numbers and deaths

As in Denmark and Norway, the number of new COVID-19 cases rose rapidly in Sweden from the start of March. But Denmark and Norway both implemented tighter restrictions, and their case numbers fell away from April.

Sweden maintained its rate of roughly [600 new cases](#) per day throughout April and May, and then the numbers started to rise again, reaching 1,300 per day at the start of July.

By the end of July, Sweden had the [7th highest](#) per-capita death rate in the world, and about [ten times larger](#) than its Nordic neighbors. Outbreaks spread to [aged care facilities](#) and the vulnerable.

Sweden has to date had about 80,000 [confirmed cases](#) of COVID-19—though this is likely to be an underestimate—and about 5,700 people have died. This would equate to about 15,000 lives lost in Australia.

Sweden's economic situation is still very serious

Even with its lighter lockdowns, Sweden has suffered economic losses almost as severe as its Nordic counterparts.

The Swedish labor market has been [hit hard](#). Unemployment is expected to peak at between 9-11%, cushioned by a fall in labor-force participation as Swedes leave the labor market entirely.

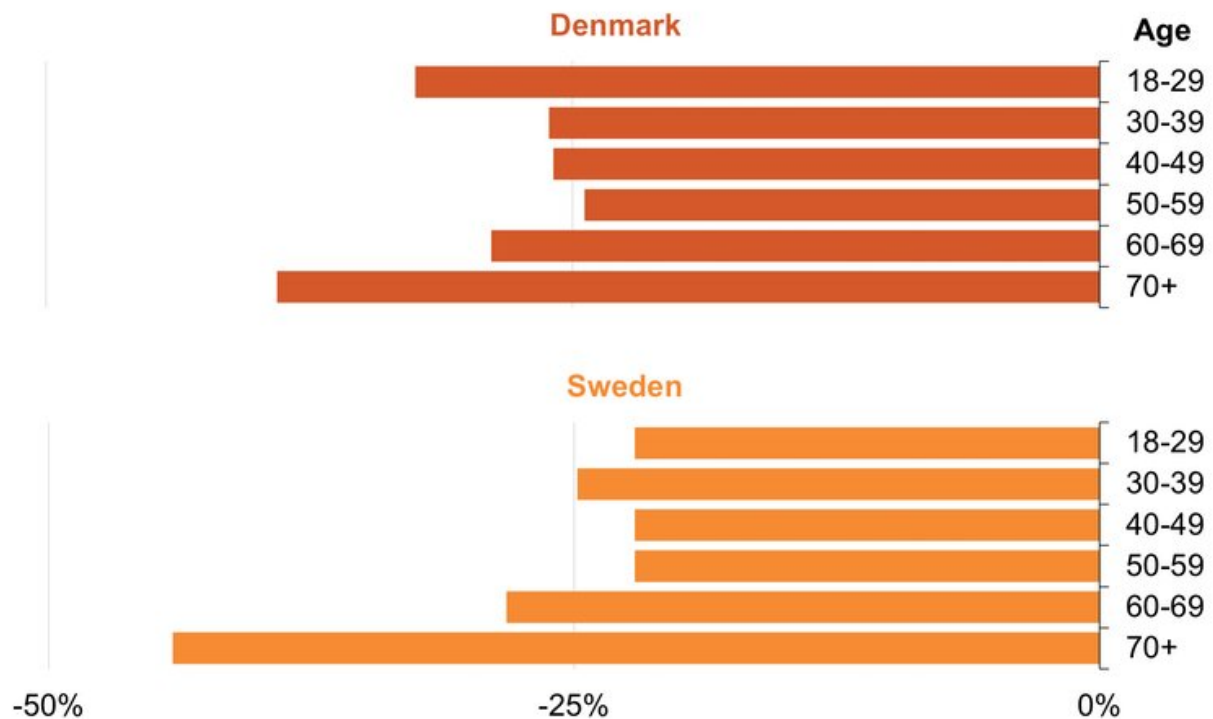
The country's central bank estimates [GDP will fall by 4-6%](#), depending on a second wave of infections.

In comparison, Australia's treasury expects the unemployment rate here

to peak [at 9.25%](#), and for GDP to fall by 2.5%.

COVID-19, rather than lockdowns, drove the economic decline GRATTAN
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Change in spending by age group, percentage



Source: Figure A4 Andersen et al 2020, *Pandemic, Shutdown and Consumer Spending: Lessons from Scandinavian Policy Responses to COVID-19, May 2020*

COVID-19, rather than lockdowns, drove the economic decline. Credit: Andersen et al 2020, *Pandemic, Shutdown and Consumer Spending: Lessons from Scandinavian Policy Responses to COVID-19, May 2020*

Like in Australia, the Swedish government has provided [financial support](#) to businesses to reduce the number of job losses, and given additional support to the "[many people](#)" who will lose their jobs.

Economists from the University of Copenhagen have [compared Sweden](#)

[and Denmark](#). Both countries had similar exposure to COVID-19 at the beginning of the pandemic, and similar economic conditions before the crisis.

Denmark imposed stricter restrictions from early March, closing the border to all foreign nationals, limiting social gatherings to ten, shutting schools, universities, and non-essential work, and encouraging the entire population to stay home and minimize social contact.

The economists examined the spending of 860,000 people in the two countries. They found consumer spending dropped by 29% in Denmark, but it also fell by 25% in Sweden. People in both countries had changed their behavior to reduce their risk of infection, regardless of government-mandated restrictions.

Where Sweden stands now

Swedes' confidence in the ability of their government and health authority to handle the crisis [decreased](#) between April and June.

Their neighbors seem to have limited confidence too. Norway, Denmark and Finland have created a "[travel bubble](#)", but Sweden is excluded from it.

While new COVID-19 cases in Sweden have been decreasing from the peak at the beginning of July, they still sit at about 250 per day. Denmark and Norway have been below that level since mid-April.

Swedes have paid a heavy price to get to where they are—and they're still quite some way from controlling the spread of COVID-19, as their neighbors have done.

We don't have to lose the lives that Sweden has to learn from its

experience. Loose restrictions make COVID-19 harder to control. When the virus is out of control it spreads rapidly, putting millions of vulnerable people at greater risk and reducing the economic activity of the population.

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