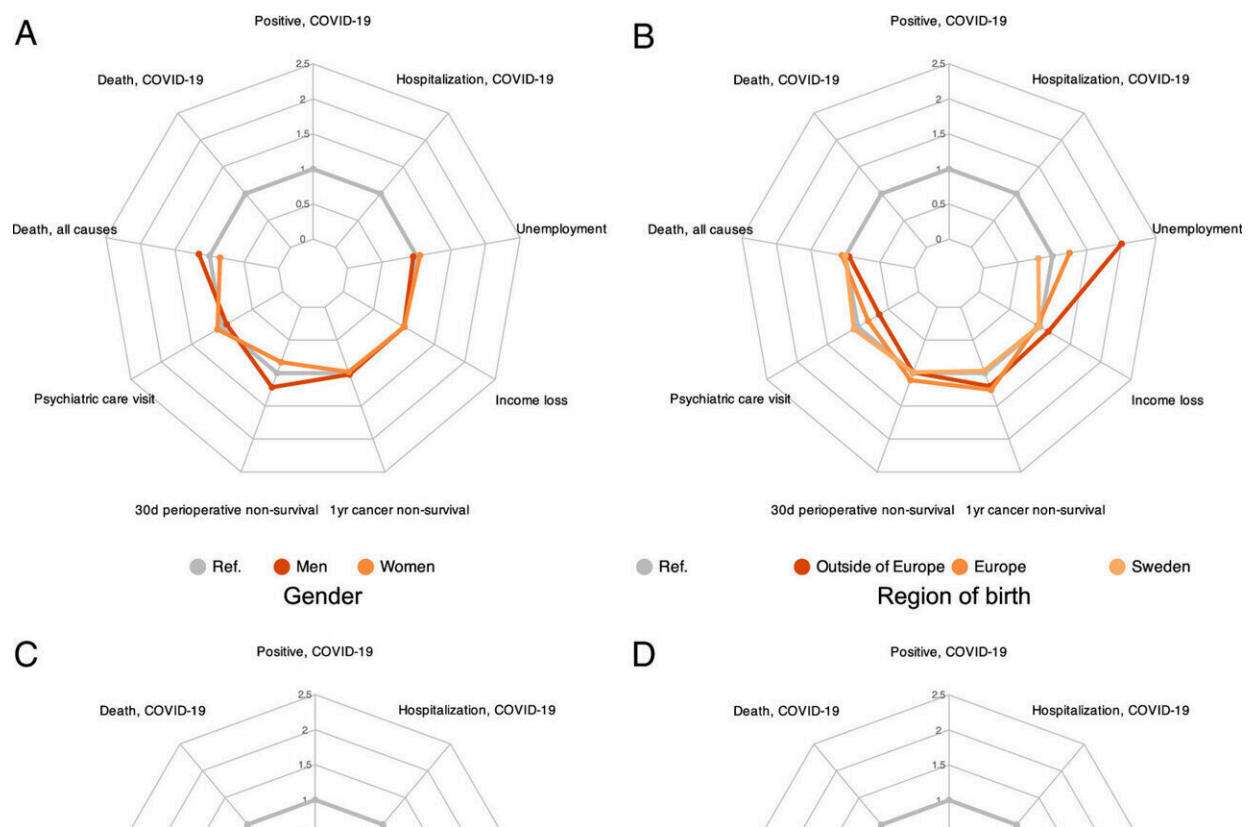


# COVID-19 imposed new burdens on already disadvantaged groups and left pre-existing social inequalities in place: Study

November 13 2023



Multidimensional inequality, 2016 to 2019. Notes: The radar plots in the figure show relative risks for each of six negative life events in each of four dimensions, gender (panel A), region of birth (panel B), education (panel C), and income (panel D). The different-colored curves represent different social groups, as explained in the legend. Their respective relative risks are estimated in regressions that include controls for age and region. The figure shows these point

estimates (reported with SEs in *SI Appendix*, Tables S8–S16), computed as predictive margins compared to population averages. Thus, a value of, say, 1.5 for a group means that this group is 50% more likely to suffer from the negative event, compared to the population at large. The measures of relative unemployment risk and of relative income-loss risk are calculated in the total population aged 25 to 64 y, while the other measures are calculated in the population of all individuals 25 y and older. Credit: *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2023). DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2303640120

An article by Stockholm University researchers, [published](#) in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)*, relies on data for the entire Swedish population and uncovers how the COVID-19 pandemic created new social inequalities and affected existing inequalities.

The researchers present two new findings:

1. Disadvantaged groups—those with low incomes, low education, and born outside of Europe—suffered the most, not just from severe COVID-19 disease and death, but from the [pandemic's](#) indirect effects: worse general health, reduced access to [medical care](#), and economic strain.
2. The structure of [social inequalities](#) that prevailed in the years before the pandemic remained in place during the first two years of the pandemic (2020 and 2021).

The study is part of SWECOV, a larger project on the causes and consequences of the pandemic, led by one of the authors, Professor Torsten Persson.

"Our results confirm that pandemic burdens were not shouldered equally," says Adam Altmejd, one of the co-authors. "Socially

vulnerable individuals faced higher risks not just to fall seriously sick or die from COVID-19, but also to suffer from [lower income](#), lose their job, not have a cancer diagnosed, or not get an operation."

While it is known that different aspects of the pandemic struck harder against some groups than others, it has been hard to measure the comprehensive impact on inequality, because of the disparate methods and measures employed by different researchers in different disciplines.

The researchers address this knowledge gap. They use the same method to measure the relative risks to experience not just SARS-CoV-2 infection, COVID-19 hospitalization and death, but additionally six indirect negative life outcomes, reflecting [general health](#), economic strain, and access to medical care. They also do so for different social groups—people with different gender, education, income, and world region of birth.

"The inertia in social inequalities is particularly striking," added author Olof Östergren, "Our research underscores the resilience of structural inequalities in Sweden, even in the wake of an unprecedented health crisis that originated elsewhere."

**More information:** Adam Altmejd et al, Inequality and COVID-19 in Sweden: Relative risks of nine bad life events, by four social gradients, in pandemic vs. prepandemic years, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2023). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2303640120](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2303640120)

Provided by Stockholm University

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