
THE ENDURING CASE FOR HARD LOCKDOWNS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic was probably the defining event of the early 2020s, casting a shadow over everyday human activities across the globe and affecting virtually all spheres of society. In addition to the very significant physical and mental toll attributable to the disease outbreak, the responses to the pandemic on both the international, governmental, and local levels sparked a multitude of controversies. After the vast majority of countries decided to enter some form of lockdown, especially during the first year of the pandemic, a non-pharmaceutical intervention that was generally appraised to be in line with the prevailing expert consensus, recent media analyses of the measures to control the pandemic have frequently challenged the need for strict interventions of that nature, with some of them characterizing the societal restrictions such as business shutdowns as excessive and as an example of a cure that is worse than the disease. The paper employs qualitative methodology, which is reliant on the integrated analysis of a vast collection of secondary sources that fall within the political science, sociology, and epidemiology disciplines. It advances a threefold argument. Firstly, it contends that there is presently a strong undercurrent of somewhat ill-conceived revisionism, which frames the lockdowns as unscientific, illegitimate, and panic-inducing while the gravity of the epidemiological situation during which they were instituted as well as the various positive aspects associated with them are swept under the carpet. Secondly, the paper looks into some of the non-medical benefits of hard lockdowns, focusing on two countries that are almost universally regarded as COVID-19 success stories - New Zealand and Norway - pinpointing how a strong response to a virus threat that is premised upon a suppression strategy can be quite beneficial in terms of fostering national unity while also in itself often being reflective of the existence of healthy social dynamics and low levels of political polarization within a society. In this context, Sweden, which notably did not order a conventional lockdown, is juxtaposed against the New Zealand and Norway examples. Thirdly, given that there are ample grounds on which to argue that future pandemics may actually pose even greater risks to human life and well-being than COVID-19, creating a popular culture narrative that automatically equates lockdowns and uncompromising approaches to combating infectious diseases with government overreach and creeping authoritarianism may encourage regular citizens to do away with certain useful habits internalized during the pandemic and cause them to be less prepared to rise to the occasion when facing similar health-related challenges in the upcoming decades.

Keywords: COVID-19, pandemic, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden

1. INTRODUCTION

The *SARS-CoV-2 novel coronavirus* originated in Wuhan, Hubei, China at the end of 2019, quickly spreading around the world in the early months of 2020 and resulting in a virtually unprecedented global health crisis, with the Public Health Emergency of International Concern, which was first declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 30 January 2020, lasting for a period of more than three years. While the short-term effects of the pandemic were immediately visible because of the ushering in of lifestyle changes, the disease burden and the dramatic loss of human life, in the medium-term there was a reduction in global life expectancy, a worldwide decline in mental health, a significant fall in gross domestic product (GDP) across countries as well as the engendering of fundamental transformations when it came to the nature of many social activities. (Williams et al., 2023). The policy debates regarding the mistakes made and what a proper response to the pandemic should have entailed have frequently been intense and generated a multitude of controversies. In particular, the lockdowns and the lockdown-related restrictions have often been criticized (Nocera & McLean, 2023) by politicians, lawyers, journalists, and a number of health professionals, who have challenged the necessity of imposing strict lockdowns or have in certain instances insisted (while sometimes acknowledging the benefit of hindsight) that societies could have weathered the storm without any government-mandated public health measures like stay-at-home orders and curfews. (Thomas, 2023) Lockdown policies are typically associated with restrictions on internal movement, bans on international travel, and the closures of businesses and educational establishments. However, lockdowns have sometimes also been defined in the literature in reductionist ways, being equated with the “imposition of at least one compulsory non-pharmaceutical intervention” (Murdoch & Caulfield, 2023) or even regarded as synonymous with policies mandating face masks, in the case of which there are no discernible impacts on the citizens’ freedom of movement. (Ibid) Especially since the subsiding of the pandemic and the entering of what could cautiously be described as a post-pandemic phase, anti-lockdown discourse has become common on social media, for instance

among bloggers, politicians, and public intellectuals. (Seymour, 2023) The notion that lockdowns were actually a failure has in some respects come to be internalized as truism in certain circles. Lockdown-related measures have accordingly been described as profoundly unscientific and more sinister motives have also been ascribed to them, being equated with a government desire to permanently hold regular citizens in check and deprive them of their civil liberties. (Murdoch & Caulfield, 2023) In countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, what has been depicted as the mainstreaming of pandemic (and to be more specific lockdown) revisionism has no longer been largely confined to the political right, as evidenced by the enthusiastic public reception of the books *In Covid's Wake* (Karma, 2025) and *The Covid Consensus: The Global Assault on Democracy and the Poor?* (Seymour, 2023), the authors of which are considered to occupy the centre-left to the left part of the political spectrum. In the US context, in particular, notable critics of the lockdown measures have actually secured political wins since the start of Donald Trump's second tenure as president of the United States – two prominent such figures being Jay Bhattacharya, who currently serves as the Director of the National Institutes of Health, and Robert F. Kennedy Jr. who is presently the Secretary of Health and Human Services. (Serres, 2025).

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The paper employs methods that are typical of qualitative research, focusing on the analysis of both primary and secondary sources of information within disciplines such as sociology and epidemiology, including newspaper reports, interviews, journal articles, and review articles. Once a brief literature review has been conducted in order to provide an understanding regarding the current state of the field when it comes to the themes that are under examination, there is an attempt to upend some of the prevailing orthodoxies, reinterpret previous findings and offer new insights. The article refrains from developing concrete hypotheses from the outset of the research journey in order to allow for a smoother interaction between the theory and the data, with the research process expected to remain open-ended throughout.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

If we are to turn back the clock to the spring of 2020, there is a strong basis for making the argument that there was for the most part no alternative to taking decisive anti-COVID measures, amongst which lockdown-related ones inevitably had to be part of the equation, at least in many countries in Europe, which were popular with international travelers and were about to bear the brunt of the first COVID-19 wave. Given the inability of the Chinese authorities to nip the the original disease outbreak in the bud and the COVID-19 cases demonstrably putting the health systems of Italy (Horowitz, 2020) and the United Kingdom, (Reed, 2024) to take two examples of European countries severely affected by the pandemic, on the brink of collapse, national governments only had the choice between three imperfect options. They could take an unobtrusive approach and only issue guidelines; attempt to test, trace and put under quarantine; or decide upon social distancing measures that would as a rule culminate in a lockdown. (Plümper & Neumayer, 2022) The moral considerations aside, which of course remain of the uttermost importance, the optics of settling for inaction were not really acceptable from the standpoint of most governments, in part due to the cautionary tales from China and Italy (of which most regular citizens were very much aware) pertaining to the repercussions of letting the virus rip through the population. In fact, the perception that the authorities were essentially leaving people to fend for themselves during a once-in-a-lifetime emergency brought about the erosion of the last vestiges of legitimacy of the political elites even in the case of a consolidated authoritarian regime such as Belarus, where president Alexander Lukashenko's lackadaisical response to the pandemic helped trigger the largest anti-government protests in the history of the country. (Krawatzek & Sasse, 2021) The second option could also not realistically be implemented by most sovereign states because of the lack of sufficient testing capacity as well as the exponential rise in infections, soon making the process of contact tracing essentially equivalent to searching for a needle in a haystack. Thus, albeit not an ideal one, a third strategy involving lockdown-related measures had to be adopted out of sheer necessity. (Plümper & Neumayer, 2020) The preponderance of evidence still suggests that lockdowns were effective in helping to limit the spread of the virus, at least in the early stages of the pandemic. For instance, there are credible assessments according to which if the Chinese authorities had not imposed a draconian lockdown on Wuhan in January 2020, COVID-19 cases would have been more than 100% higher in the 347 Chinese cities located outside Hubei province, (Rebucci, 2024) while the 2025 UK COVID inquiry indicates that 23,000 lives would have likely been saved during the first wave if the lockdown had been introduced about a week earlier. (Dewsnip, 2025) A University of Michigan-led study published in early 2022 paints a more comprehensive picture by bringing economic considerations to the table as well – it estimates that from March through August 2020, the nationwide lockdowns and other mitigation measures in the United States contributed to saving significantly more lives (866,350 to 1,711,150) than the number of lives potentially lost (57,922 to 245,055) that were attributable to the actual economic downturn resulting from the pandemic. (Bailey, 2022) There is also another point in favor of the

lockdowns that tends to go under the radar –the decisions taken by governments to close some parts of their economies and issue stay-at-home orders were arguably in some respects reflective of an optimistic belief in human ingenuity, which eventually turned out to be correct. To be more precise, the lockdowns largely represented stop-gap measures that intended to save as many lives as possible prior to the arrival of vaccines. In the opinion of Michael Osterholm, the director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota, in October 2020 there were already clear signs that sufficiently effective vaccines were right around the corner, (Karma, 2025) so risking the lives of a large number of people by refraining from adopting a no-nonsense policy towards containing the virus represented an ethically dubious proposition. To sum up, there are still strong reasons to argue that the lockdowns ticked all the boxes when it came to the cost-benefit approach (the net benefit of a lockdown for virtually everyone was evaluated by the experts to be higher in comparison to the possible alternatives), the contractualist approach (given the high degree of uncertainty because of the lack of sufficient knowledge about the virus in early 2020 and the impossible situations medical professionals in many countries had found themselves in, it would, in light of the overall circumstances, be unlikely to be dismissed outright by a randomly chosen individual due to being viewed as a disproportionate measure), and the shutdowns were also in line with the democratic approach because they were generally implemented without flouting the proper constitutional procedures. (Levie, A. & Levie, G., 2021) With regard to the notion of democratic legitimacy, if we are to take European countries as an example, (Oana et. al., 2025) there was generally a high degree of popular support for locking down society, at least during the first wave of the pandemic. The critiques leveled at lockdowns due to the negative externalities, especially in relation to their impacts on the economy and the young people of working age who were less at risk from the virus, also do not appear to give sufficient credit to the (initially unintended) positive effects. For instance, the COVID-19 containment measures were quite helpful in reducing the transmission of other respiratory pathogens and associated diseases such as the seasonal flu. There is also some tacit evidence that lockdowns sometimes had a signaling effect with regard to the urgency of the pandemic, actually encouraging an increase in the wearing of face masks (Danelski, 2023) and were positively correlated with improvements in the subjective well-being of citizens across a number of countries. (Gilbert et al., 2020) Lastly, one additional caveat that is worth considering when evaluating the responses to the COVID-19 pandemic concerns the rapid emergence of new SARS-CoV-2 variants that exhibited (and continue to do so) significant differences from each other. Delta was the most virulent one, bringing about severe symptoms and was considered to pose the highest risk of a lethal outcome, (Milzer, 2022) though its spread in 2021, at least in certain countries, coincided with and was partially offset by the start of the vaccination campaigns. (Del Rio et al., 2021) In particular, the heavily mutated Omicron variant, which was first identified in South Africa in November 2021, had a rather specific clinical presentation and in some respects, while of course far from harmless, turned COVID-19 into a different type of disease than the one caused by the previous variants, (Gili & Burioni, 2023) with its hyper transmissibility playing a part into COVID-19's apparent transition from a pandemic into an endemic disease, notably changing the calculus when it came to the eliminationist or COVID-Zero strategies of countries such as New Zealand. (Trnka, 2022) In short, lockdown skepticism or even lockdown denialism may sound perfectly reasonable when it comes to early 2022 when the Omicron virus was manifesting its peculiar pattern of spread and a few experts were hopeful that it could confer some type of a natural immunity against further infections, but over the course of the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, when Alpha and Delta were the prominent variants and the health systems were constantly at risk of being overwhelmed, the worldwide medical emergency was evidently on a rather different plane.

In addition to the abovementioned considerations, a closer look at two of the countries – New Zealand and Norway - that are almost universally regarded as having set the bar high when it comes to what constitutes success in the fight against COVID-19, for instance as measured by the Effectiveness of Pandemic Management Rate (IEGP), further testifies to the wide-ranging benefits of lockdowns. (Malagon, 2022) From the outset of the pandemic the government of New Zealand was quick to react and adopted an approach that closely mirrored the recommendations of scientists and which was characterized as an "elimination strategy" towards the virus, the key elements of which were strict nationwide (beginning from 25 March 2020) as well as more targeted lockdowns. Capable leadership, which is believed to be a significant distinguishing factor between the success stories and those countries that failed to cope with the pandemic, was also by no means in short supply. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's uncanny ability to be attentive to the general public and show the right mixture of firmness and empathy was important in "selling" the shutdown of society to the citizens of New Zealand. (Ibid) The 'be strong, be kind' messaging emanating from the authorities resonated with New Zealanders while the 'team of five million' framing of the lockdown was quite effective in terms of "nudging" citizens in the direction of desired behaviors – New Zealanders expressed support, and at times even enthusiasm, for the strict measures put in place to "crush the curve". (Trnka, 2022) The clear rationale provided for the decision allowed regular people to feel a high degree of agency, the stringency of the restrictions notwithstanding. (Jenkins et al., 2021) New Zealand's successful implementation of the lockdown was

also attributable to the premium placed on social harmony – the country’s handling of ethnic and racial relations during the pandemic, albeit far from flawless, was much better than quite a few other countries with comparable demographics, for example in terms of the avoidance of the stigmatization of visible minorities as “disease carriers”. (Liu & Ran, 2020) It is difficult to envision how a perception of decisive leadership can coexist with a *laissez-faire* or hands off approach to governing a pandemic. Ardern’s clear focus on putting her eggs in the aggressive suppression or elimination rather than the mitigation basket (until the arrival of the Omicron variant), which resulted in the country successfully stopping the transmission of the virus within its borders on a number of occasions, made it virtually impossible for a remotely credible alternative approach to be proposed by political opponents, which in turn strengthened national unity. Furthermore, the New Zealand case offers tangible proof that a willingness to impose a lockdown, rather than reflective of authoritarian inclinations on the part of the authorities, can actually epitomize confident leadership and is a litmus test for the degree of social cohesion within the society in question. In other countries, such as in Bulgaria during the autumn of 2020, lockdowns were sometimes significantly delayed, not due to the health authorities managing to control the spread of the virus without resorting to them, but because of the government presiding over a highly polarized society, leading to concerns that it could compromise its political survival by enacting robust mitigation measures, which would supposedly not garner the approval of the citizens. (Martino, 2020) Similarly, Sweden’s light-touch approach to the management of COVID-19 may have been partially attributable to the existing intra-societal tensions that typified the political landscape in 2020, which were connected to processes such as the weakening of its social democracy and the growing strength of political parties on the right. (Soto, 2022)

The other poster child in the battle against COVID-19, the country of Norway, was not averse to implementing a strict lockdown in the early stage of the pandemic. While the government was somewhat hesitant and was carefully weighing its options until 12 March 2020, on that date it introduced stringent restrictions that included the closures of schools and businesses, with an emphasis on keeping a tight lid on cluster-based transmission. (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2020) The effectiveness of the Norwegian response may be explained by the broad political consensus with regard to the need for a lockdown, with even the right-wing populist *Fremskrittspartiet* (FrP) or Progress Party often displaying alignment with the government’s position on the subject of the COVID-19 regulations, (Wiggen, 2021) the extensive financial assistance provided to businesses, and the successful mobilization of the wider society to combat the disease. (Dewan, 2021) In a similar fashion to New Zealand, immigrants and minorities were generally well-disposed towards the Norwegian government’s handling of the pandemic, with the COVID-19 situation in Norway often compared favorably to that in their countries of origin. (Arora et al., 2022)

The experience of Sweden, which chose a rather different path to control the disease, reliant not on lockdowns, but mostly on public health recommendations, encouraging the citizens to show individual responsibility and exercise their own discretion as to the appropriate course of action, was in pronounced contrast to the two countries discussed above. (Soto, 2022) It faced a much larger first wave of infections and fatalities in comparison to the other sovereign states in Scandinavia and while Sweden’s overall pandemic performance did eventually start to compare favorably to that of many European countries, the intervening variable that needs to be considered is that this only happened after it began a very successful vaccine rollout in the spring of 2021. (Karma, 2025) As a counter-example to New Zealand and Norway’s philosophies based on an elimination or a strong suppression of the virus, Sweden indirectly illustrates another benefit of the strict lockdowns – stringent containment measures can remove unnecessary layers of ambiguity and may be more likely to preclude compliance issues when it comes to diverse groups that are part of the country’s social fabric. Immigrants in Sweden were on the whole less attuned to the authorities’ messaging compared to native Swedes and a disproportionate number of the former, in particular those from Somalia, Iraq, and Syria, were among the COVID-19 cases registered at Swedish hospitals in the initial months of the pandemic. (Rotschild, 2020) During the autumn of 2020, when Sweden was affected by a second COVID-19 wave, which turned out to be more serious than the first, the government began tightening restrictions, for instance by closing public workplaces such as gyms that were deemed non-essential, which actually brought Swedish policies more in line with those of most other European countries. (Dahlström & Lindvall, 2021) In March 2021 the Swedish police warned against the vagueness of the language employed by the health authorities, emphasizing that it was quite difficult for the general public to keep up to date as to which rules were truly mandatory and which constituted recommendations. (Soto, 2022) Even though the majority of Swedes were supportive of the no-lockdown strategy, the autumn 2020 surge in COVID-19 cases resulted in a decreased trust in the government (Ibid), the Public Health Agency, and the state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell, described as the architect of the Swedish approach towards the management of the pandemic. (Wei, 2021) Furthermore, Sweden is another example of how anti-lockdown (and face mask skeptical) sentiments do not necessarily go hand in hand with transparency and tolerance of opposing views. The policies in relation to COVID-19 were crafted by Tegnell and a small, insular group of government officials, (Hiltzik, 2022) who did not always constructively engage with dissenting scientists in Sweden who

preferred a lockdown, such as Lena Einhorn from the Vetenskapsforum COVID-19, the COVID-19 Science Forum, and there were even reported instances of medical professionals who regularly wore masks while working with patients being reprimanded, released from their duties or not given new contracts. (Vogel, 2020) All in all, strict measures that are accompanied by skillful and consistent communication across all channels are often vastly preferable to overly permissive public health policies that at some point will need to be hardened anyway due to the collective judgment of the mostly well-meaning citizens still falling short of the expected standards.

Another potential long-term benefit from the lockdowns concerns the “muscle memory” acquired by many societies courtesy of the compliance with the internal movement restrictions, the self-isolation requirements, the rules regarding the wearing of protective equipment, and so on. Many of the countries that handled COVID-19 well, such as Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, could draw on their prior experience with the SARS-CoV-1 pandemic in 2002-03, (Roy, 2020) or in the case of New Zealand, made good use of the pre-existing fire risk systems as an inspiration for the COVID-19 alert system that had four levels. (Kearney, 2020) Attempting to simplistically portray the lockdowns as intrinsically flawed containment measures that represented power grabs on the part of politicians and bureaucrats could be a limiting cognitive factor by potentially influencing regular citizens in Western Europe and the United States to abandon certain habits picked up during the COVID-19 pandemic – certain practices and routines like staying at home when feeling sick will likely be conducive to handling the next viral outbreak that may eventually appear on the horizon. This is especially pertinent given that cultural characteristics typical of the West (such as individualism) have been negatively correlated with adherence to non-pharmaceutical interventions compared to those associated with East Asia (like collectivism). (Tu et al., 2023) Zoonotic spillover is generally believed to have been a major factor behind most of the viral pandemics in the 20th century. With frequent reports of new coronaviruses being detected in bat populations (Rogers, 2025) as well as current global trends such as urbanization and habitat destruction bringing animals and humans in closer proximity to each other than before, there will almost inevitably be fertile soil for future spillovers of that nature. (Bhatia et al., 2024) Furthermore, it is not out of the question that the next pandemic could actually have a higher lethality than COVID-19, (Gregory & Elgot, 2021) so encouraging regular citizens to be intrinsically suspicious of and unwilling to stomach lockdown-related measures may actively work to the detriment of pandemic control efforts. On the positive side, according to expert evaluations, if the right lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic are drawn, the risk of the occurrence of another comparative pandemic may see a reduction by as much as 71%. (Global Center for Health Security, 2023)

4. CONCLUSION

It is certainly the case that the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns had, especially in the short-term, detrimental economic impacts on most countries, negatively affected the quality of many children’s education and the provision of mental health services while in certain instances they resulted in infringements on citizens’ rights. It is nonetheless important to keep in mind that lockdowns were the one and only measure that allowed many societies to emerge relatively unscathed from the pandemic, especially prior to the development of the COVID-19 vaccines, and such shutdowns of the economy, even though far from representing a silver bullet, may once again turn out to be one of the most reliable tools at the policymakers’ disposal in order to restore some semblance of normality if at some point in the future societies find themselves forced to confront a health emergency of a similar magnitude.

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