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News

Covid-19: Group of UK and US experts argues for “focused protection” instead of lockdowns

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Jeanne Lenzer

[Author affiliations](#)

Thousands of medical practitioners and public health scientists have signed a declaration arguing for an alternative public health approach to dealing with covid-19.

The Great Barrington Declaration,¹ published on Monday 5 October, was drawn up by three epidemiologists and public health experts from Harvard, Oxford, and Stanford universities, who describe their approach as “focused protection” of the people most at risk.

As of Wednesday 7 October almost 6300 medical practitioners and public health scientists from the US, the UK,

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immunity, he said at a meeting in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, “is not a strategy—but a biological reality that will arrive sooner or later, either naturally or through a vaccine, or both.”

He defended the Swedish approach, saying that “schools were never closed for children aged 1 to 15, with zero covid-19 deaths . . . and the United States has now passed Sweden in terms of deaths per million inhabitants, despite Sweden having an older, more high risk population.”⁵

Benefits and harms

On Monday the declaration’s authors met with Alex Azar, US secretary of health and human services, and Scott Atlas, an adviser to President Trump, for what Kulldorff described as a “very good discussion.”⁶

However, Stefan Baral, a physician epidemiologist and associate professor at Johns Hopkins University, said he was concerned that the meeting had taken place. Baral explained that, while he generally agreed that lockdowns were causing serious harms, he had declined to sign the declaration because it did not address the concrete steps needed to assist the most vulnerable people.

Baral told *The BMJ* that three steps must accompany any loosening of restrictions: firstly, the removal of any barriers to accessing healthcare; secondly, paid leave for people affected by covid-19; and lastly, housing support for such people in multigenerational households.

“Sweden instituted paid leave from day 1,” he said. “You can call in sick and know that you are going to be able to eat that night. In the US, if you call in sick, you and your family may not eat.”

Bhattacharya, one of the authors, said that he welcomed such criticisms, as he hoped that the declaration would be just the beginning of an important dialogue about the benefits, and the harms, of public health interventions.

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