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What If: Measuring the counterfactual.

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Many program evaluation studies are expected to provide evidence about the program in three general areas. First, an accurate description of the program, including an explicit articulation of its underlying logic or theory. This is often critical if the causal assumptions embedded in the program are to be properly understood. Second, identification of appropriate outcomes and measurement of them using rigorous methods. One valuable approach in this area is to measure the counterfactual (i.e. what would have happened in the absence of the intervention), as this may be essential for making causal inferences about the effect of the initiative. Third, information other than short-term outcomes measures is increasingly sought to inform stakeholders about the sustainability of the program and/or identify possible alternatives.

This paper focuses on the second of these, in particular the measurement of the counterfactual. The underlying logic of this approach is explored, as well as its pitfalls, and some approaches to its measurement are discussed. The approach is described in detail using an example from a recent evaluation study of a crime prevention program in Western Australia. The potential benefits of measuring the counterfactual are explored particularly in providing influential information to key stakeholders.