



**Evidence for Decisions:
Causes and Consequences**

COURSE B OUTLINE

The big idea of the course is to get people to think carefully and systematically about how policies and programs impact the world. A truly evidence-based policy takes into account what has worked and not worked in the past, and can be evaluated for its impact. This requires us to define the causal chain and the counterfactual, identify and evaluate the evidence to demonstrate impact, and account for alternative explanations and unintended consequences of our policy decisions. By the end of this course, learners will be equipped with the tools to truly detect evidence of the impact of policies on the world, and use these tools for better policies in the process.

	Topic	Content	Assignments
Week 1	Priors and Counterfactuals	<p>Drawing out existing beliefs about the world (<i>priors</i>)</p> <p>Understanding what would have happened if a policy never existed (<i>counterfactual</i>)</p> <p>Tool: Theory of Change</p>	<p>Individual assignments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing assignment • Discussion <p>Group assignments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Synchronous hour meeting • Group case analysis
Week 2	Evidence for a Theory of Change	<p>Methods to translate priors into a concrete representation of impact</p> <p>The theory of change as a representation of causal mechanisms expected to produce this impact</p> <p>Focus on causal links and evidence to confirm or negate causal links</p>	<p>Individual assignments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing assignment • Case analysis • Discussion <p>Group assignments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Synchronous hour meeting • Group case analysis
Week 3	Threats to the Counterfactual	<p>Impact evaluation and the <i>approximation of the counterfactual</i> in the real world</p> <p>Systematic ways to rule out <i>alternative explanations</i></p> <p>Tool: Central threats to the counterfactual</p>	<p>Individual assignments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Case analysis • Quiz <p>Group assignments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Synchronous hour meeting • Group case analysis

	Topic	Content	Assignments
Week 4	Study Designs	<p>Study designs for different goals, resources, and timelines</p> <p>Introduction to matching, difference-in-differences, regression discontinuity, and randomized control trials</p> <p>Tools: Basics of 4 study designs</p>	<p>Individual assignments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Case analysis • Quiz <p>Group assignments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Synchronous hour meeting • Group case analysis
Week 5	Mixing Qualitative and Quantitative Methods	<p>Rationale and strengths of qualitative research and how it can be incorporated into program evaluation</p> <p>Use of mixed methods for more rigorous understanding of a program or policy</p>	<p>Individual assignments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing assignment • Case analysis <p>Group assignments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Synchronous hour meeting • Group case analysis
Week 6	Updating Your Priors	<p>Updating priors with new evidence learned from evaluation</p> <p>Detection of unintended consequences</p> <p>Revisiting your theory of change</p>	<p>Individual assignments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer review assignment <p>Group assignments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Synchronous hour meeting • Group peer consultations

Materials

All course materials will be provided each week, including videos, readings, and assignment templates.

This course uses global examples from across sectors to help you develop your capacity for causal evidence. Examples include global traffic congestion, US economic mobility, community health organizing in Tanzania and Indonesia, Jamaican social programs, and many others.

Scoring

Course performance is not assigned a letter grade, but instead a designation of Pass or No Pass. Approximately the top 10% of the course (not necessarily those who score above 90%) are recognized with Pass with Distinction.

50%: Individual Assignments and Quizzes

25%: Group Assignments

10%: Case Analysis Companions

10%: Discussion Posts

5%: Feedback Surveys

Course Policies

See onlinelearning.hks.harvard.edu for full FAQs.