

Statistical Inference for Estimation in Data Science

DTSA 5002 offered on Coursera

by the University of Colorado, Boulder

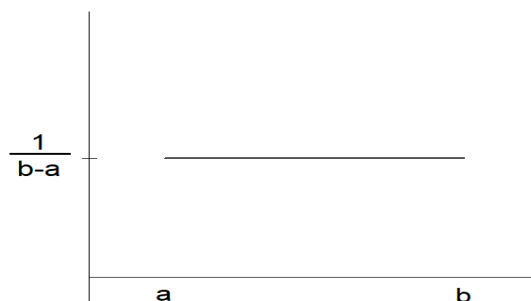
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For continuous distributions, the probability density function (pdf) $f(x)$ for a random variable X does not equal the probability that X equals x . Continuous random variables have so many possible values that the probability of observing any single one of them is zero. Instead, the pdf is a curve under which area represents probability. Here we describe the pdfs for several continuous distributions that are important for data science applications.

The Uniform Distribution

Let X be a continuous random variable on the interval (a, b) with a constant “flat line” pdf.



Since the total area under the pdf must be 1, this forces the height of the line to be $1/(b - a)$. The pdf is therefore

$$f(x) = \frac{1}{b - a} \cdot I_{(a,b)}(x).$$

We say that X has a **uniform distribution** over (a, b) and we write $X \sim \text{unif}(a, b)$.

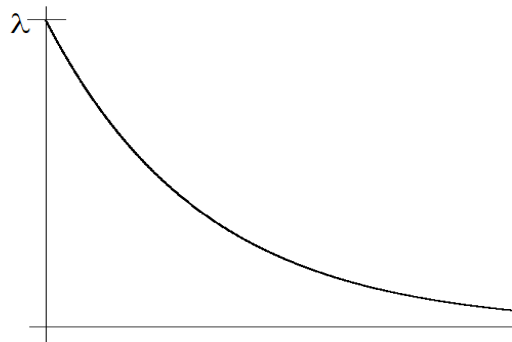
The uniform distribution is the continuous version of “equally likely outcomes”. Consider the probability that X is in the interval (c, d) where the interval (c, d) is contained within the

interval (a, b) . One can “slide” this interval around, and, as long as it remains fully contained in (a, b) , the probability that X falls in the interval remains the same!

The Exponential Distribution

Let X be a continuous random variable with pdf

$$f(x) = \begin{cases} \lambda e^{-\lambda x} & , \quad x \geq 0 \\ 0 & , \quad x < 0. \end{cases}$$
$$= \lambda e^{-\lambda x} I_{(0, \infty)}(x).$$



Suppose that we are standing near the door of a grocery store watching customers arrive.

Suppose further that

- the arrival rate is a constant 15.2 people per minute, and
- the number of arrivals in non-overlapping periods of time are independent.

Let

X = the time (in minutes) between any two consecutive arrivals.

One can show (usually in a course about Markov processes) that X has the exponential pdf given above with $\lambda = 15.2$. We will write $X \sim \exp(\text{rate} = \lambda)$.

Note that some people write the exponential pdf as $f(x) = \frac{1}{\lambda} e^{-x/\lambda} I_{(0, \infty)}(x)$. In this case, λ is known as a “mean” parameter for reasons which will become apparent in this course. We will write $X \sim \exp(\text{mean} = \lambda)$.

Be advised that most people and textbooks simply write $X \sim \exp(\lambda)$ and it is up to you to figure out which pdf they are using!

The Normal Distribution

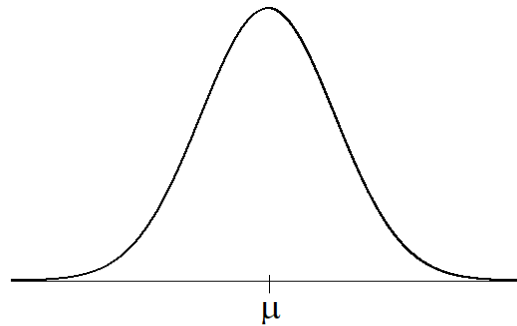
Let X be a continuous random variable with pdf

$$f(x) = \frac{1}{\sqrt{2\pi\sigma^2}} e^{-\frac{1}{2\sigma^2}(x-\mu)^2} \quad \text{for } -\infty < x < \infty.$$

Then X is said to have a normal distribution with mean μ and variance σ^2 . (We will be defining mean and variance in this course shortly.) We write $X \sim N(\mu, \sigma^2)$.

We will not include an indicator on this pdf since it would be equal to 1 for all x and won't be "zeroing out" anywhere.

The graph of the $N(\mu, \sigma^2)$ pdf is the infamous "bell curve" in statistics. It is centered at μ and the value of σ^2 controls how wide and spread out it is. In fact, if you do a little calculus, you'll see that the curve changes concavity at $\mu + \sigma$ and $\mu - \sigma$. Cool!



The Gamma Distribution

Let X have a "**gamma distribution** with parameters α and β ". For us, this means that X is a continuous random variable with pdf

$$f(x) = \frac{1}{\Gamma(\alpha)} \beta^\alpha x^{\alpha-1} e^{-\beta x} I_{(0,\infty)}(x) \quad (1)$$

for some parameters $\alpha > 0$ and $\beta > 0$.

We will write $X \sim \Gamma(\alpha, \beta)$.

We will devote an entire video/lesson to the gamma distribution later in this Module. For now, here are a few important things to note.

- (i) Just as with the exponential distribution, some people/books, write $X \sim \Gamma(\alpha, \beta)$ to mean that X has pdf

$$f(x) = \frac{1}{\Gamma(\alpha)} (1/\beta)^\alpha x^{\alpha-1} e^{-x/\beta} I_{(0,\infty)}(x).$$

Here, α and β are known as the “shape” and “scale” parameters, respectively.

For our form of the gamma pdf, β is known as the “inverse scale parameter”. (Don’t worry too much about knowing what to call these parameters!)

***** In this course, when we say that $X \sim \Gamma(\alpha, \beta)$, we will always mean that X has the pdf given by equation (1).**

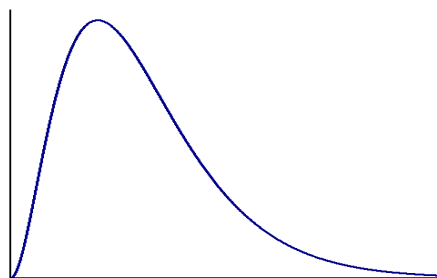
- (ii) The pdf involves something known as the “gamma function”, $\Gamma(\alpha)$, which we define below. It is just the constant that ensures that the pdf integrates to 1. The constant $\Gamma(\alpha)$ should not be confused with $\Gamma(\alpha, \beta)$ (two arguments) which is the name of a distribution.

- (iii) $\Gamma(\alpha)$ and β^α are just constants. From just looking at the “ x -part”

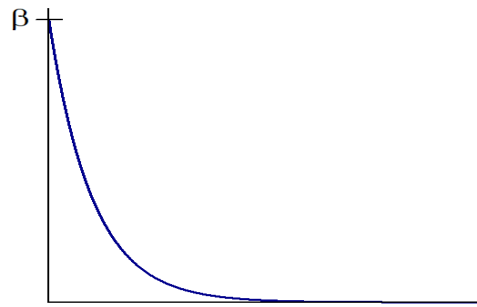
$$x^{\alpha-1} e^{-\beta x}$$

we see that the gamma distribution takes on 3 general shapes.

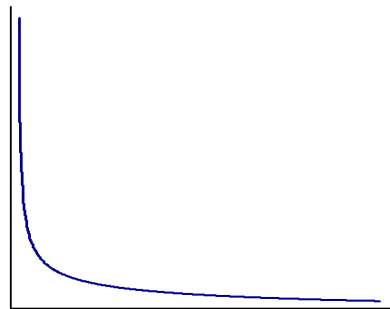
If $\alpha > 1$, we have x to a positive power times e to a negative power. When evaluated at $x = 0$, the pdf is 0. It then increases as x increases because of the $x^{\alpha-1}$ until, eventually, the decreasing $e^{-\beta x}$ takes over and becomes strong enough to make the entire pdf decrease.



If $\alpha = 1$, the $x^{\alpha-1}$ disappears and the pdf comes down to $e^{-\beta x}$ times $\beta/\Gamma(1)$. This is an exponential pdf. The exponential pdf with rate β is $\beta e^{-\beta x} I_{(0,\infty)}(x)$. This integrates to 1. If we divide this by $\Gamma(1)$ and still expect it to be a valid pdf that integrates to 1, we must have $\Gamma(1) = 1$ even though we have yet to define this gamma function!



Finall, if $0 < \alpha < 1$, the $x^{\alpha-1}$ part of the pdf is 1 over x to a positive power. This will “blow up” as x gets close to 0. Indeed, the pdf in this case has the y -axis as an asymptote.



The Gamma Function

The pdf for the gamma distribution was defined using the **gamma function** which is denoted by $\Gamma(\cdot)$.

The gamma function, is defined, for $\alpha > 0$, as

$$\Gamma(\alpha) = \int_0^{\infty} x^{\alpha-1} e^{-x} dx.$$

Note that, for any $\beta > 0$,

$$\int_0^{\infty} \beta^{\alpha} x^{\alpha-1} e^{-\beta x} dx = \int_0^{\infty} (\beta x)^{\alpha-1} e^{-\beta x} \beta dx \stackrel{u=\beta x}{=} \int_0^{\infty} u^{\alpha-1} e^{-u} du = \Gamma(\alpha)$$

(Here we have used the fact that $du = \beta dx$ and that if x goes from 0 to ∞ , then $u = \beta x$ also goes from 0 to ∞ since $\beta > 0$.)

Now,

$$\int_0^{\infty} \frac{1}{\Gamma(\alpha)} \beta^{\alpha} x^{\alpha-1} e^{-\beta x} dx = \frac{1}{\Gamma(\alpha)} \int_0^{\infty} \beta^{\alpha} x^{\alpha-1} e^{-\beta x} dx = \frac{1}{\Gamma(\alpha)} \cdot \Gamma(\alpha) = 1,$$

so basically $1/\Gamma(\alpha)$ is the constant that makes $\beta^{\alpha} x^{\alpha-1} e^{-\beta x}$ into a proper pdf over $x \geq 0$!

Properties of the Gamma Function

(i) $\Gamma(1) = 1$

Proof: $\Gamma(1) = \int_0^{\infty} x^{1-1} e^{-x} dx = \int_0^{\infty} e^{-x} dx = 1.$

(Fun fact: We did not need to compute that integral since it is the integral of the $\exp(\text{rate} = 1)$ pdf over its support $(0, \infty)$. It must integrate to 1 if it is a valid pdf!)

(ii) For $\alpha > 1$,

$$\Gamma(\alpha) = (\alpha - 1) \cdot \Gamma(\alpha - 1).$$

Proof: $\Gamma(\alpha) = \int_0^{\infty} x^{\alpha-1} e^{-x} dx$ Using integration by parts

$$\int u dv = uv - \int v du$$

with $u = x^{\alpha-1}$ and $dv = e^{-x} dx$ (So $du = (\alpha - 1)x^{\alpha-2} dx$ and $v = \int e^{-x} dx = -e^{-x}$.), we have

$$\begin{aligned} \Gamma(\alpha - 1) &= -x^{\alpha-1} e^{-x} \Big|_0^{\infty} + \int_0^{\infty} (\alpha - 1)x^{\alpha-2} e^{-x} dx \\ &= 0 + (\alpha - 1) \int_0^{\infty} x^{\alpha-2} e^{-x} dx = (\alpha - 1) \cdot \Gamma(\alpha - 1) \quad \checkmark \end{aligned}$$

(iii) If $n \geq 1$ is an integer,

$$\Gamma(n) = (n - 1)!.$$

Proof: By repeated application of property 2,

$$\begin{aligned} \Gamma(n) &= (n - 1)\Gamma(n - 1) = (n - 1)(n - 2)\Gamma(n - 2) \\ &= \dots = (n - 1)(n - 2) \cdots (1) \underbrace{\Gamma(1)}_1 = (n - 1)! \end{aligned}$$