

# A comparison of design-based and model-based approaches for finite population spatial data.

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## Abstract

The design-based and model-based approaches to frequentist statistical inference lie on fundamentally different foundations. In the design-based approach, inference depends on random sampling. In the model-based approach, inference depends on distributional assumptions. In this manuscript, we compare the approaches for finite population spatial data. We first provide relevant background for the approaches and then use a simulation study and an analysis of real mercury concentration data to numerically compare them. We find that sampling plans that incorporate spatial locations (spatially balanced samples) perform better than sampling plans ignoring spatial locations (non-spatially balanced samples), regardless of whether design-based or model-based approaches were used to analyze the data. We also find that within sampling plans, the model-based approaches often outperform design-based approaches, even for skewed data. This gap in performance is small when spatially balanced samples are used but large when non-spatially balanced samples are used.

## 1. Introduction

There are two general approaches for using data to make frequentist statistical inferences about a population: design-based and model-based. When data cannot be collected for all units in a population (i.e., population units), data are collected on a subset of the population units. This subset is called a sample. In the design-based approach, inferences about the underlying population are informed via a probabilistic process assigning some population units to be part of the sample. Alternatively, in the model-based approach, inferences are made from specific assumptions about the underlying process generating the data. Each paradigm has a deep historical context (Sterba, 2009) and its own set of benefits and drawbacks (Hansen et al., 1983).

Though the design-based and model-based approaches apply to statistical inference in a broad sense, we focus on comparing these approaches for spatial

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data. We define spatial data as data that incorporates the specific locations of the population units into either the design or estimation process. De Gruijter and Ter Braak (1990) give an early comparison of design-based and model-based approaches for spatial data, quashing the belief that design-based approaches could not be used for spatially correlated data. Since then, there have been several general comparisons between design-based and model-based approaches for spatial data (Brus and De Gruijter, 1997; Brus, 2021; Ver Hoef, 2002, 2008; Wang et al., 2012). Cooper (2006) reviews the two approaches in an ecological context before introducing a “model-assisted” variance estimator that combines aspects from each approach. In addition to Cooper (2006), there has been substantial research and development into estimators that use both design and model-based principles (see e.g., Sterba (2009), Cicchitelli and Montanari (2012), Chan-Golston et al. (2020) for a Bayesian approach).

Certainly comparisons between design-based and model-based approaches to spatial data have been studied. But no numerical comparison has been made between design-based approaches incorporating spatial information and design-based approaches. In this manuscript, we compare design-based approaches incorporating spatial information to model-based approaches for spatial data. We focus on finite populations, but these comparisons generalize to infinite populations as well. A finite population contains a finite number of population units; an example is lakes (treated as a whole with the lake centroid representing location) in the contiguous United States. An infinite population contains an infinite number of population units; an example is locations within a single lake.

The rest of the manuscript is organized as follows. In Section 2, we introduce and provide relevant background for the design-based and model-based approaches to finite population spatial data. In Section 3, we use a simulation study to compare the performance of the approaches in a variety of scenarios. In Section 4, we compare the performance of the approaches on real data that contains mercury concentration in lakes from the contiguous United States. And in Section 5, we end with a discussion and provide directions for future research.

## 2. Background

The design-based and model-based approaches incorporate randomness in fundamentally different ways. In this section, we describe the role of randomness for each approach and the subsequent effects on statistical inferences for spatial data.

### 2.1. Comparing Design-Based and Model-Based Approaches

The design-based approach assumes the population is fixed. Randomness is incorporated via the selection of units in a sampling frame. A sampling frame is the set of all units available to be sampled. Units from the sampling frame are selected as part of the sample according to a sampling design, which assigns a positive probability of inclusion (inclusion probability) to each unit from the sampling frame. Some examples of commonly used sampling designs include

68 simple random sampling, stratified random sampling, and cluster sampling.  
69 When sampling designs incorporate spatial locations into sampling, we call  
70 the resulting samples “spatially balanced.” One approach to selecting spatially  
71 balanced samples is the Generalized Random Tessellation Stratified (GRTS)  
72 algorithm (Stevens and Olsen, 2004), which we discuss in more detail in Section  
73 2.2. When sampling designs do not incorporate spatial locations into sampling,  
74 we call the resulting samples “non-spatially balanced.”

75 Fundamentally, the design-based approach combines the randomness of the  
76 sampling design with the data collected via the sample to justify the estimation  
77 and uncertainty quantification of fixed, unknown parameters of a population (e.g.,  
78 a population mean). Treating the data as fixed and incorporating randomness  
79 through the sampling design yields estimators having very few other assumptions.  
80 Confidence intervals for these types of estimators are typically derived using  
81 limiting arguments that incorporate all possible samples. Sample means, for  
82 example, are asymptotically normal (Gaussian) by the Central Limit Theorem  
83 (under some assumptions). If we repeatedly select samples from the population,  
84 then 95% of all 95% confidence intervals constructed from a procedure with  
85 appropriate coverage will contain the true, fixed mean. Särndal et al. (2003)  
86 and Lohr (2009) provide thorough reviews of the design-based approach.

87 The model-based approach assumes the data are a random realization of  
88 a data-generating stochastic process. Randomness is incorporated through  
89 distributional assumptions on this process. Strictly speaking, randomness need  
90 not be incorporated through random sampling, though Diggle et al. (2010) warn  
91 against preferential sampling. Preferential sampling occurs when the process  
92 generating the data locations and the process being modeled are not independent  
93 of one another. To guard against preferential sampling, model-based approaches  
94 often still implement some form of random sampling.

95 Instead of estimating fixed, unknown population parameters, as in the design-  
96 based approach, often the goal of model-based inference is to predict a realized  
97 variable, or value. For example, suppose the realized mean of all population  
98 units is the value of interest. Instead of *estimating* a fixed, unknown mean, we  
99 are *predicting* the value of the mean, a random variable. Prediction intervals are  
100 then derived using assumptions of the data-generating stochastic process. If we  
101 repeatedly generate response values from the same data-generating stochastic  
102 process and select samples, then 95% of all 95% prediction intervals constructed  
103 from a procedure with appropriate coverage will contain their respective realized  
104 means. Cressie (1993) and Schabenberger and Gotway (2017) provide thorough  
105 reviews of model-based approaches for spatial data. In Figure 1, we provide a  
106 visual comparison of the design-based and model-based approaches (Ver Hoef  
107 (2002) and Brus (2021) provide similar figures).

## 108 2.2. Spatially Balanced Design and Analysis

109 We previously mentioned that the design-based approach can be used to  
110 select spatially balanced samples (samples that incorporate spatial locations  
111 of the population units and are “well-spread” in space). Spatially balanced  
112 samples are useful because parameter estimates from these samples tend to

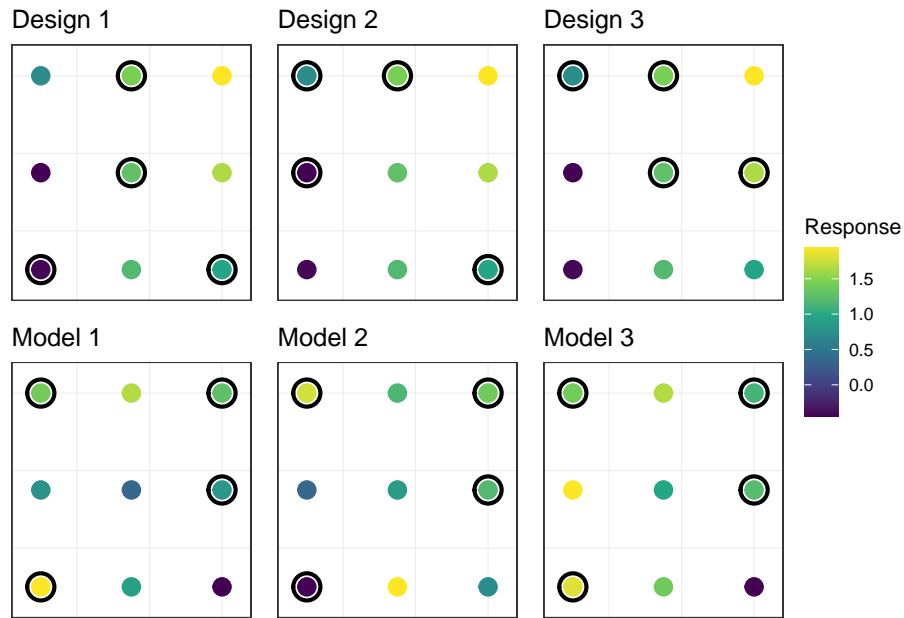


Figure 1: A visual comparison of the design-based and model-based approaches. In the top row, there is one fixed population with nine population units and three random samples of size four (points circled are those sampled). The response values at each site are fixed, but we obtain different estimates for the mean response in each random sample. In the bottom row, there are three realizations of the same data-generating stochastic process that are all sampled at the same four locations. The data-generating stochastic process has a single mean, but the mean of the nine population units is different in each of the three realizations.

113 vary less than parameter estimates from samples that are not spatially balanced  
 114 (Barabesi and Franceschi, 2011; Benedetti et al., 2017; Grafström and Lundström,  
 115 2013; Robertson et al., 2013; Stevens and Olsen, 2004; Wang et al., 2013).  
 116 The first spatially balanced sampling algorithm seeing widespread use is the  
 117 Generalized Random Tessellation Stratified (GRTS) algorithm (Stevens and  
 118 Olsen, 2004). To quantify the spatial balance of a sample, Stevens and Olsen  
 119 (2004) proposed loss metrics based on Voronoi polygons (Dirichlet Tessellations).  
 120 After the GRTS algorithm was developed, several other spatially balanced  
 121 sampling algorithms emerged, such as the Local Pivotal Method (Grafström et  
 122 al., 2012; Grafström and Matei, 2018), Spatially Correlated Poisson Sampling  
 123 (Grafström, 2012), Balanced Acceptance Sampling (Robertson et al., 2013),  
 124 Within-Sample-Distance Sampling (Benedetti and Piersimoni, 2017), and Halton  
 125 Iterative Partitioning Sampling (Robertson et al., 2018). In this manuscript, we  
 126 select spatially balanced samples using the Generalized Random Tessellation  
 127 Stratified (GRTS) algorithm because it has several attractive properties. More  
 128 specifically, the GRTS algorithm accommodates finite and infinite sampling  
 129 frames, equal, unequal, and proportional (to size) inclusion probabilities, legacy  
 130 (historical) sampling (Foster et al., 2017), a minimum distance between units in  
 131 a sample, and replacement units (replacement units are population units that  
 132 can be sampled when a population unit originally selected can no longer be  
 133 sampled). The GRTS algorithm selects samples by utilizing a particular mapping  
 134 between two-dimensional and one-dimensional space that preserves proximity  
 135 relationships. Via this mapping, units in two-dimensional space are partitioned  
 136 using a hierarchical address. This hierarchical address is used to map population  
 137 units to a one-dimensional line. On the one dimensional line, each population  
 138 unit's line length equals its inclusion probability. Then, a systematic sample of  
 139 population units is selected on the line, yielding desired sample. Stevens and  
 140 Olsen (2004) provides more technical details.

After selecting a sample and collecting data, unbiased estimates of population  
 means and totals can be obtained using the Horvitz-Thompson estimator (Horvitz  
 and Thompson, 1952). If  $\tau$  is a population total, the Horvitz-Thompson estimate  
 of  $\tau$ , denoted by  $\hat{\tau}_{ht}$ , is given by

$$\hat{\tau}_{ht} = \sum_{i=1}^n Z_i \pi_i^{-1}, \quad (1)$$

141 where  $Z_i$  is the value of the  $i$ th population unit in the sample and  $\pi_i$  is the  
 142 inclusion probability of the  $i$ th population unit in the sample. An estimate of  
 143 the population mean is obtained by dividing  $\hat{\tau}_{ht}$  by  $N$ , the number of population  
 144 units.

145 It is also important to quantify uncertainty  $\hat{\tau}_{ht}$ . Horvitz and Thompson  
 146 (1952) and Sen (1953) provide variance estimators for  $\hat{\tau}_{ht}$ , but these estimators  
 147 have two drawbacks. First, they rely on calculating  $\pi_{ij}$ , the probability that  
 148 population unit  $i$  and population unit  $j$  are both in the sample – this quantity  
 149 can be challenging if not impossible to calculate analytically. Second, these  
 150 estimators ignore the spatial locations of the population units. To address these

151 two drawbacks simultaneously, Stevens and Olsen (2003) proposed the local  
 152 neighborhood variance estimator. The local neighborhood variance estimator  
 153 does not rely on  $\pi_{ij}$  and incorporates spatial locations – for technical details see  
 154 Stevens and Olsen (2003). Stevens and Olsen (2003) show the local neighborhood  
 155 variance estimator tends to reduce the estimated variance of  $\hat{\tau}$  and yield narrower  
 156 confidence intervals compared to variance estimators that ignore spatial locations.

### 157 2.3. Finite Population Block Kriging

158 Finite Population Block Kriging (FPBK) is a model-based approach that  
 159 expands the geostatistical Kriging framework to the finite population setting  
 160 (Ver Hoef, 2008). Instead of developing inference based on a specific sampling  
 161 design, we assume the data are generated by a spatial stochastic process. We  
 162 summarize some of the basic principles of FPBK next (for more technical details,  
 163 see Ver Hoef (2008)) Let  $\mathbf{z} \equiv \{z(s_1), z(s_2), \dots, z(s_N)\}$  be an  $N \times 1$  response vector  
 164 at locations  $s_1, s_2, \dots, s_N$  that can be measured at the  $N$  population units.  
 165 Suppose we want to use a sample to predict some linear function of the response  
 166 variable,  $f(\mathbf{z}) = \mathbf{b}'\mathbf{z}$ , where  $\mathbf{b}'$  is a  $1 \times N$  vector of weights (e.g, the population  
 167 mean is represented by a weights vector whose elements all equal one). Denoting  
 168 quantities that are part of the sampled population units with a subscript  $s$  and  
 169 quantities that are part of the unsampled population units with subscript  $u$ , let

$$\begin{pmatrix} \mathbf{z}_s \\ \mathbf{z}_u \end{pmatrix} = \begin{pmatrix} \mathbf{X}_s \\ \mathbf{X}_u \end{pmatrix} \boldsymbol{\beta} + \begin{pmatrix} \boldsymbol{\delta}_s \\ \boldsymbol{\delta}_u \end{pmatrix}, \quad (2)$$

170 where  $\mathbf{X}_s$  and  $\mathbf{X}_u$  are the design matrices for the sampled and unsampled  
 171 population units, respectively,  $\boldsymbol{\beta}$  is the parameter vector of fixed effects, and  
 172  $\boldsymbol{\delta} \equiv [\boldsymbol{\delta}_s \ \boldsymbol{\delta}_u]'$ , where  $\boldsymbol{\delta}_s$  and  $\boldsymbol{\delta}_u$  are random errors for the sampled and unsampled  
 173 population units, respectively.

FBPK assumes  $\boldsymbol{\delta}$  in Equation 2 has mean-zero and a spatial correlation structure that can be modeled using a covariance function. This covariance function is commonly assumed to be non-negative (between zero and one), second-order stationary (depending only on the distance between population units), isotropic (independent of direction), and decay with distance between population units (Cressie, 1993). Henceforth, it is implied that we have made these same assumptions regarding  $\boldsymbol{\delta}$ , though Chiles and Delfiner (1999), pp. 80-93 discuss covariance functions that are not second-order stationary, not isotropic, or both. A variety of flexible covariance functions can be used to model  $\boldsymbol{\delta}$  (Cressie, 1993); one example is the exponential covariance function (for a thorough list of spatial covariance functions, see Cressie (1993)). The  $i, j$ th element of the exponential covariance matrix,  $\text{cov}(\boldsymbol{\delta})$ , is

$$\text{cov}(\delta_i, \delta_j) = \begin{cases} \sigma_1^2 \exp(-h_{i,j}/\phi) & h_{i,j} > 0 \\ \sigma_1^2 + \sigma_2^2 & h_{i,j} = 0 \end{cases}, \quad (3)$$

174 where  $\sigma_1^2$  is the variance parameter quantifying the variability that is dependent  
 175 (coarse-scale),  $\sigma_2^2$  is the variance parameter quantifying the variability that is

independent (fine-scale),  $\phi$  is the range parameter measuring the distance-decay rate of the covariance, and  $h_{i,j}$  is the Euclidean distance between population units  $i$  and  $j$ . The proportion of variability attributable to dependent random error is  $\sigma_1^2/(\sigma_1^2 + \sigma_2^2)$ . Similarly, the proportion of variability attributable to independent random error is  $\sigma_2^2/(\sigma_1^2 + \sigma_2^2)$ . Finally we note that  $\sigma_1^2$  and  $\sigma_2^2$  are often called the partial sill and nugget, respectively.

With the above model formulation, the Best Linear Unbiased Predictor (BLUP) for  $f(\mathbf{b}'\mathbf{z})$  and its prediction variance can be computed. While details of the derivation are in Ver Hoef (2008), we note here that the predictor and its variance are both moment-based, meaning that they do not rely on any distributional assumptions.

Other approaches, such as k-nearest-neighbors (Fix and Hodges, 1989; Ver Hoef and Temesgen, 2013), random forests (Breiman, 2001), Bayesian models (Chan-Golston et al., 2020), among others, could also be used to obtain predictions for a mean or total from spatially correlated responses of a finite population. Compared to the k-nearest-neighbors and random forest approach, we prefer FBPK because it is model-based and relies on theoretically-based variance estimators leveraging the model’s spatial covariance structure, whereas k-nearest-neighbors and random forests use ad-hoc variance estimators (Ver Hoef and Temesgen, 2013). Additionally, Ver Hoef and Temesgen (2013) studied compared FBPK, k-nearest-neighbors, and random forests in a variety of spatial data contexts, and FBPK tended to perform best. Compared to the Bayesian approach, we prefer FBPK mostly because it is much more computationally efficient.

### 3. Simulation Study

We used a simulation study to investigate performance of four sampling-analysis combinations: IRS with a design-based analysis, called “IRS-Design”; IRS with a model-based analysis, called “IRS-Model”; GRTS sampling with a design-based analysis, called “GRTS-Design”; GRTS sampling with a model-based analysis, called “GRTS-Model”. These combinations are also provided in Table 1.

	Design	Model
IRS	IRS-Design	IRS-Model
GRTS	GRTS-Design	GRTS-Model

Table 1: Sampling-analysis combinations in the simulation study. The rows give the two types of sampling designs and the columns give the two types of analyses.

Performance for the four sampling-analysis combinations was evaluated in 36 different simulation scenarios. The 36 scenarios resulted from the crossing of three sample sizes, two location layouts, two response types, and three proportions of dependent random error. The three sample sizes ( $n$ ) were  $n = 50, n = 100$ , and  $n = 200$ . Samples were always selected from a population size ( $N$ ) of  $N = 900$ .

212 The two location layouts (of the population units) were random and gridded.  
 213 Locations in the random layout were randomly generated inside the unit square  
 214  $([0, 1] \times [0, 1])$ . Locations in the gridded layout were placed on a fixed, equally  
 215 spaced grid inside the unit square. The two response types were normal and  
 216 lognormal. For the normal response type, the response was simulated using mean-  
 217 zero random errors with the exponential covariance (Equation 3) for varying  
 218 proportions of dependent random error. The proportion of dependent random  
 219 error is represented by  $\sigma_1^2/(\sigma_1^2 + \sigma_2^2)$ , where  $\sigma_1^2$  and  $\sigma_2^2$  are the dependent random  
 220 error variance (partial sill) and independent random error variance (nugget),  
 221 respectively, from Equation 3. The total variance,  $\sigma_1^2 + \sigma_2^2$ , was always 2. The  
 222 range was always  $\sqrt{2}/3$ , which means that the correlation in the dependent  
 223 random error decayed to nearly zero at the largest possible distance between  
 224 two units in the domain. For the lognormal response type, the response was first  
 225 simulated using the same approach as for the normal response type, except that  
 226 the total variance was 0.6931 instead of 2. The response was then exponentiated,  
 227 yielding a random variable whose total variance is 2. The lognormal responses  
 228 were used to evaluate performance of the sampling-analysis approaches for data  
 229 that were skewed (i.e., not normal).

Sample Size (n)	50	100	200
Location Layout	Random	Gridded	-
Proportion of Dependent Error	0	0.5	0.9
Response Type	Normal	Lognormal	-

Table 2: Simulation scenario options. All combinations of sample size, location layout, response type, and proportion of dependent random error composed the 36 simulation scenarios. In each simulation scenario, the total variance was two.

230 In each of the 36 simulation scenarios, there were 2000 independent simulation  
 231 trials. In each trial, IRS and GRTS samples were selected and then design-based  
 232 and model-based analyses were used to estimate (design-based) or predict (model-  
 233 based) the mean and construct confidence (design-based) or prediction (model-  
 234 based) intervals. Then we recorded the bias, squared error, and interval coverage  
 235 for all sampling-analysis combinations. After all 2000 trials, we summarized the  
 236 long-run performance of the combinations by calculating average bias, RMS(P)E  
 237 (root-mean-squared error for the design-based approaches and root-mean-squared-  
 238 prediction error for the model-based approaches), and the proportion of times  
 239 the true mean is contained in its 95% interval. The GRTS algorithm and the  
 240 local neighborhood variance estimator are available in the **R** package `spsurvey`  
 241 (Dumelle et al., 2021). FPBK is available in the `sptotal` **R** package (Higham et  
 242 al., 2021) and covariance parameters were estimated using Restricted Maximum  
 243 Likelihood (Harville, 1977; Patterson and Thompson, 1971; Wolfinger et al.,  
 244 1994).

245 The average bias was nearly zero for all four combinations in all 36 scenarios,  
 246 so we omit a more detailed summary of those results here. Tables for average  
 247 bias in all 36 simulation scenarios are provided in the supplementary material.

Figure 2 shows the relative RMS(P)E of the four approaches from Table 1



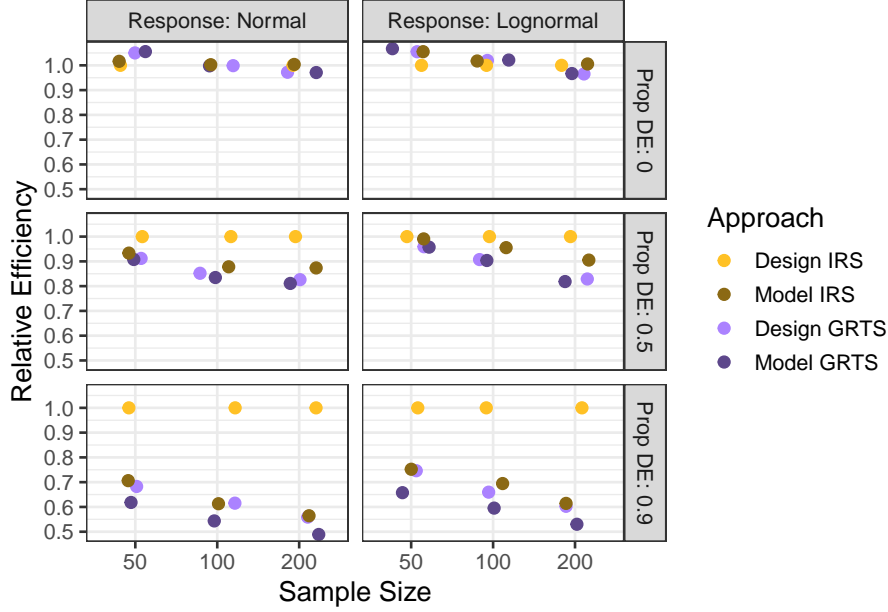


Figure 2: Relative rMS(P)E for the four sampling-analysis combinations. The rows indicate the proportion of dependent error and the columns indicate the response type.

using the random location layout with “IRS-Design” as the baseline. The relative rMS(P)E is defined as

$$\frac{\text{rMS(P)E of sampling-analysis combination}}{\text{rMS(P)E of IRS-Design}},$$

When there is no spatial correlation (Figure 2, “Prop DE: 0” row), the four sampling-analysis combinations have approximately equal rMS(P)E. So using the GRTS sampling plan or a model-based analysis does not result in much, if any, loss in efficiency compared to IRS-Design when there is no spatial correlation. When there is spatial correlation (Figure 2, “Prop DE: 0.5” and “Prop DE: 0.9” rows), GRTS-Model tends to perform best, followed by GRTS-Design, IRS-Model, and finally IRS-Design, though the difference in relative rMS(P)E among GRTS-Model, GRTS-Design, and IRS-Model is relatively small. As the strength of spatial correlation increases, the gap in rMS(P)E between IRS-Design and the other sampling-analysis combinations widens. Finally we note that when there is spatial correlation, IRS-Model outperforms IRS-Design by a large margin, suggesting that the poor design properties of IRS are largely mitigated by the model-based analysis. These conclusions are similar to those observed in the grid location layout, so we omit a grid location layout figure here. Tables for rMS(P)E in all 36 simulation scenarios are provided in the supplementary material.

We also studied 95% interval coverage among the sampling-analysis combinations. The design-based confidence intervals and model-based prediction

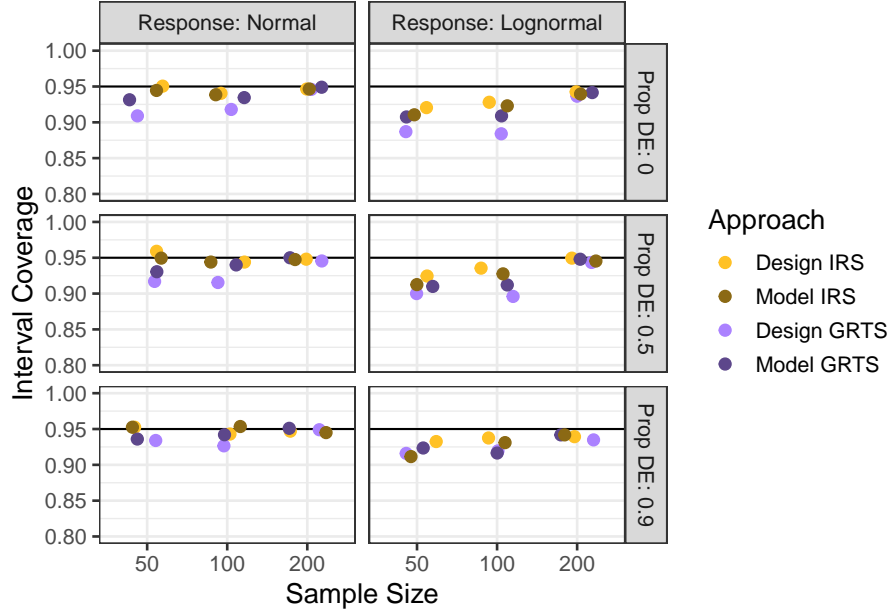


Figure 3: Interval coverage for the four sampling-analysis combinations. The rows indicate the proportion of dependent error and the columns indicate the response type. The solid, black line in each plot represents 95% coverage.

intervals were constructed using the normal distribution. Justification for this comes from the asymptotic normality of means via the Central Limit Theorem.

Figure 3 shows the 95% interval coverage for each of the four sampling-analysis combinations in the random location layout. Within each scenario, the sampling-analysis combinations tend to have fairly similar interval coverage. Coverage in the normal response scenarios was usually near 95%, while coverage in the lognormal response scenarios varied from from 90% to 95%. Coverage tended to always increase with the sample size. At a sample size of 200, all four sampling-analysis combinations had approximately 95% interval coverage in both response scenarios for all dependent error proportions. These conclusions are similar to those observed in the grid location layout, so we omit a grid location layout figure here. Tables for interval coverage in all 36 simulation scenarios are provided in the supplementary material.

#### 4. Application

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), states, and tribes periodically conduct National Aquatic Research Surveys (NARS) in the United States to assess the water quality of various bodies of water. We will use the 2012 National Lakes Assessment (NLA), which measures various aspects of lake health and water quality for lakes in the contiguous United States. Specifically, we will

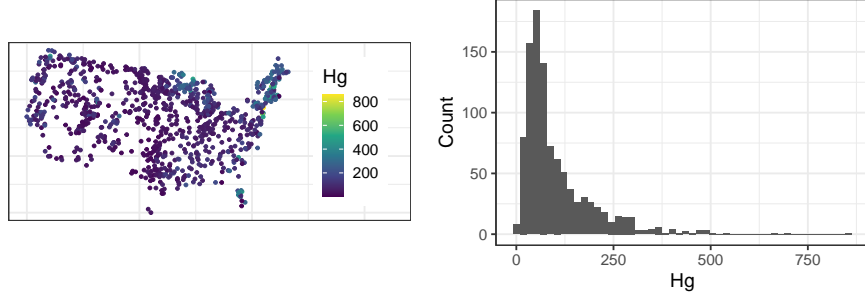


Figure 4: Population distribution of mercury concentration (hg) for 986 lakes in the contiguous United States in a spatial layout (left) and a histogram (right).

analyze mercury concentration in lakes. Although we know the true mean mercury concentration values for the 986 lakes from the 2012 NLA, we will explore whether or not we obtain an adequately precise estimate for the realized mean mercury concentration if we sample only 100 of the 986 lakes.

Figure 4 shows that mercury concentration is right-skewed, with most lakes having a low value of mercury concentration but a few having a much higher concentration. Mercury concentration exhibits some spatial correlation, with high mercury concentrations in lakes in the northeast and north central United States. The realized mean mercury concentration in the 986 lakes is 103.2 ng / g.

Approach	Estimate	SE	95% LB	95% UB
IRS-Design	112.7	8.8	95.4	129.9
IRS-Model	110.5	7.9	95.0	125.9
GRTS-Design	101.8	6.1	89.8	113.7
GRTS-Model	102.3	5.9	90.8	113.9

Table 3: Application of design-based and model-based approaches to the NLA data set on mercury concentration. The true mean concentration is 103.2 ng / g.

We selected a single IRS sample and a single GRTS sample and estimated (design-based) or predicted (model-based) the mean mercury concentration and its standard error using design-based and model-based approaches. For the model-based analyses, the exponential covariance was used. Table 3 shows the results from these analyses. For all four sampling-analysis combinations, the true realized mean mercury concentration is within the bounds of the 95% confidence (design-based) or prediction (model-based) intervals. Though we should not generalize these results to other samples from these data, we do note a couple of patterns. The design-based IRS analysis shows the largest standard error: a likely reason is that this is the only approach that does not incorporate any spatial information regarding mercury concentration. Both analyses using GRTS sampling have lower standard errors than both analyses using IRS sampling.

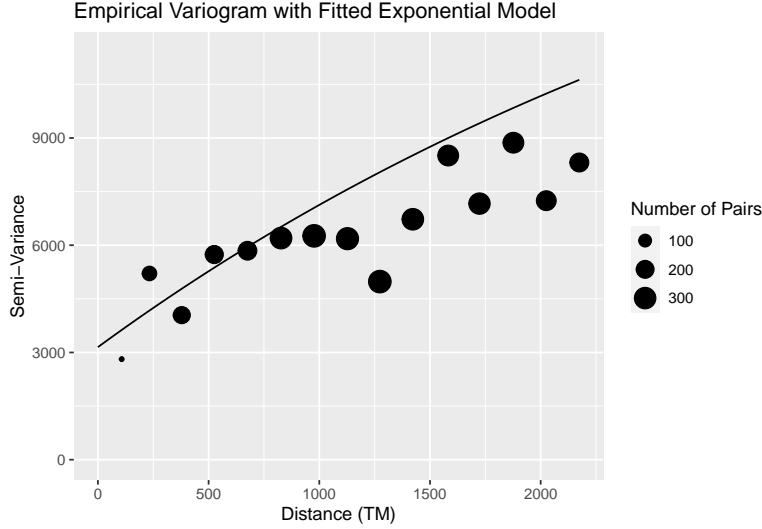


Figure 5: The empirical semivariogram (black circles) of mercury concentration against the REML fit using the estimated covariance parameters (black line) from GRTS-Model.

We expect that these patterns are consistent with other samples from these data because mercury concentration exhibits spatial patterning, so a spatially balanced sample should usually yield a lower standard error.

To better understand the dependence structure in mercury concentration, the empirical semivariogram can be visualized alongside a fit using the model-based approaches. The empirical semivariogram quantifies the halved squared differences (semivariance) among response values at different distances apart. If a process exhibits strong spatial dependence, the empirical semivariogram will have small values at small distances and large values at large distances. Figure 5 shows the empirical semivariogram quantifying the average semivariance for several distances. Overlain onto Figure 5 is the estimated semivariance obtained using the covariance parameters from the REML fit of GRTS-Model. Figure 5 provides evidence that there is strong correlation in mercury concentration among the sites.

## 5. Discussion

The design-based and model-based approaches to statistical inference are fundamentally different paradigms by which samples are selected and data are analyzed. The design-based approach incorporates randomness through sampling to estimate population parameters. The model-based approach incorporates randomness through distributional assumptions to predict realized values of a random process. Though these approaches have often been compared in the literature both from theoretical and analytical perspectives, our contribution

lies in studying them in a spatial context while implementing spatially balanced sampling. Aside from the theoretical differences described, a few analytical findings from the simulation study are particularly notable. First, the sampling decision (GRTS vs IRS) is most important when using a design-based analysis. Though GRTS-Model still outperformed IRS-Model, the model-based analysis mitigated much of the inefficiency of the IRS sample. Second, independent of the analysis approach, we found no reason to prefer IRS over GRTS for sampling spatial data – GRTS-Design and GRTS-Model generally performed at least as well as their IRS counterparts when there was no spatial correlation and noticeably better than their IRS counterparts when there was spatial correlation. Third, as the strength of spatial correlation increases, the gap in  $rMS(P)E$  between IRS-Design and the other sampling-analysis combinations also increases. Fourth and finally, when the response was normal, interval coverage for all sampling-analysis combinations was very close to 95% for all sample sizes; when the response was lognormal, interval coverage for all sampling and analysis was between 90% and 95% and closest to 95% when  $n = 200$ .

There are several benefits and drawbacks of the design-based and model-based approaches for finite population spatial data. Some we have discussed, but others we have not and they are worthy of consideration in future research. Design-based approaches are often computationally efficient, while model-based estimation can be computationally burdensome, especially for likelihood-based methods such as REML that rely on inverting a covariance matrix. The design-based approach also more naturally handles binary data, free from the more complicated logistic regression framework commonly used to analyze binary data in a model-based approach. The model-based approach, however, can more naturally quantify the relationship between covariates (predictor variables) and response variable. The model-based approach also yields estimated spatial covariance parameters, which help better understand the dependence structure in the process of study. Model selection is also possible using model-based approaches and criteria such as cross validation, likelihood ratio tests, or AIC (Akaike, 1974). Model-based approaches are capable of more efficient small-area estimation than design-based approaches by leveraging distributional assumptions in areas with few observed sites. Model-based approaches can also compute site-by-site predictions at unobserved locations and use them to construct informative visualizations. The benefits and drawbacks of both approaches, alongside our theoretical and analytical comparisons, can motivate the process of choosing among them. This is especially true from an analysis perspective, as we found that using a spatially balanced sampling algorithm benefits both design-based and model-based analyses.

## **Data and Code Availability**

This manuscript has a supplementary R package that contains all of the data and code used. Instructions for download are available at <https://github.com/michaeldumelle/DvMsp>.

## 371 **Supplementary Material**

372 In the supplementary material, we provide tables presenting summary statis-  
373 tics for all 36 simulation scenarios.

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