

Econometrics for Policy Analysis

Jared Greathouse

6/14/24

Table of contents

1	Syllabus: PMAP 4041, Fall 2024	5
1.1	Course Philosophy and Structure	5
1.2	Additional Details	7
1.3	Helpful Notes from Me	8
1.4	Class Schedule	9
1.4.1	Week 1	9
1.4.2	Week 2	9
1.4.3	Week 3	9
1.4.4	Week 4	10
1.4.5	Week 5	10
1.4.6	Week 6	10
1.4.7	Week 7	10
1.4.8	Week 8	11
1.4.9	Week 9	11
1.4.10	Week 10	11
1.4.11	Week 11	11
1.4.12	Week 12	11
1.4.13	Week 13	11
1.4.14	Week 14	12
1.4.15	Week 15	12
1.4.16	Week 16	12
2	Data and Policy Studies	13
2.1	What is This Thing Called Science?	13
2.2	4 Steps of Data Analysis	16
2.2.1	Identifying Policy Problems	16
2.2.2	Gathering Data	16
2.2.3	Cleansing Data	16
2.2.4	Analyzing Data	17
2.2.5	Presenting the Results	17
2.3	Identifying Policy Problems	17
2.3.1	Justifications For Policy	17
2.3.2	Externalities	17
2.3.3	Social Good	18
2.3.4	Why Is Tobacco a Problem?	19

3	Summary	21
I	Mathematics and Econometric Theory	22
4	Basic Probability Theory	23
4.1	Descriptive Statistics	24
4.1.1	Means: Arithmetic and Median	24
4.1.2	Variance	25
4.2	Hypothesis Testing	25
4.2.1	One Group T-Test	26
4.2.2	Two-Group T-Test	28
4.3	Uncertainty Around the Mean	30
4.3.1	Confidence Intervals and the Normal Distribution	30
4.3.2	Constructing a Confidence Interval	30
4.4	A Brief Word on Practical Significance	32
5	Summary	34
6	Asymptotic Theory	35
6.1	Law of Iterated Expectations	35
6.2	Law of Large Numbers	36
6.3	Central Limit Theorem	38
6.4	Sampling	38
7	Summary	40
8	Correlation and Association	41
8.1	A Prelude To Regression	45
8.2	The First Exercise of the Statistical Mind	46
8.3	Tying This in With Asymptotic Theory	49
8.4	Implications	50
9	Summary	51
10	OLS Explained	52
10.1	Review of Lines and Functions	52
10.2	Arrividerci, Algebra.	55
10.2.1	Derivatives	56
10.3	An Extended Example	58
10.3.1	List the Data	58
10.3.2	Define Our Econometric Model	59
10.3.3	Write Out the Objective Function	59
10.3.4	Simplify the Objective Function	62

10.3.5	Take Partial Derivatives	62
10.3.6	Get the Betas	66
10.3.7	Our OLS Line of Best Fit	67
10.4	Inference For OLS	68
10.4.1	Goodness of Fit Measures for OLS	70
10.5	Assumptions of OLS	70
10.5.1	Assumption 1: Linear in Parameters	71
10.5.2	Assumption 2: Random Sample	72
10.5.3	Assumption 3: No Perfect Collinearity	73
10.5.4	Assumption 4: Strict Exogeneity: $\mathbb{E}[\epsilon_i x_{i1}, \dots, x_{iK}] = 0$	74
11	Summary	75
12	Causal Inference	76
II	Applied Research Methods	77

1 Syllabus: PMAP 4041, Fall 2024

Note

This is an ongoing project. *None* of the material is in its final form yet. Comments and suggestions are welcome. [Jared Greathouse](#). Office Hours: By Request.

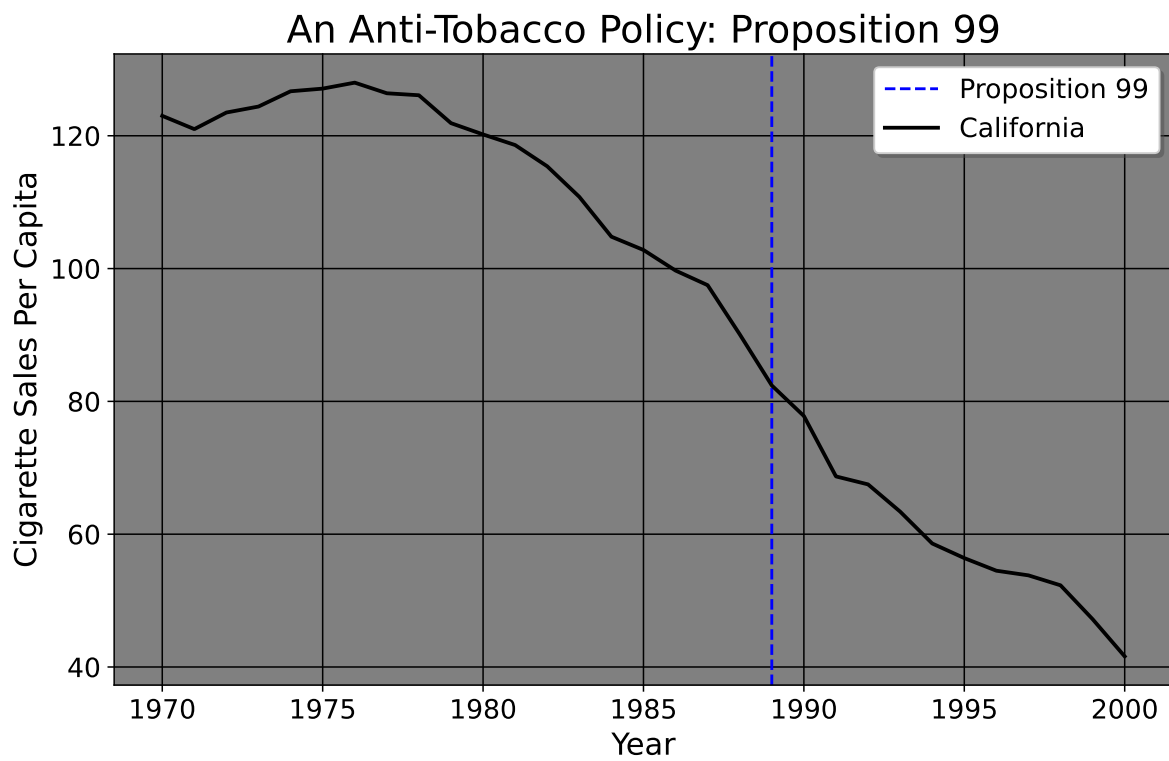
Every day, governments pass laws/public policy to affect some outcome of interest. Policy usually touches thousands if not *millions* of people. From traffic-circles to pop/sugar sweetened beverage taxes, vaccine mandates and universal pre-k programs, cannabis legalization to minimum wages, public policy impacts us all from birth to death.

Policy is never self justifying. It demands evaluation. If California bans tobacco smoking in public, or if New York City implements gun control, presumably we would agree these *likely* impact outcomes like tobacco use or homicide rates, ideally decreasing both of them.

If California's [anti-tobacco policy](#) didn't affect smoking rates at all (or worse, if more people began to smoke) or if gun control has 0 impact on homicide rates (or increased them, paradoxically), then surely these could not be justified in the very first place. Before we continue, understand fundamentally these outcomes being affected *are* the point. The only reason that we, as a society, do policy is precisely **because** we think policy affects (or should affect) people somehow. If political science studies "who gets what where", one summation of policy studies might be "what works?" But what policies should we care about? How can we know if they work? This is the starting point for empirical policy analysis. This class discusses the theory and process for how statistical analysis of data may be used to answer policy questions.

1.1 Course Philosophy and Structure

I believe the best way to demonstrate knowledge of policy analysis is through *writing*. As such, there will be no quizzes or in-class exams. Why? It is unrealistic. In real life, rarely do we have an hour and 30 minutes or a ten minute quiz window on the internet to write a full summation of our ideas or think through a question. Typically, we have much more time and resources to help us. In fact, proper use of resources *is what makes a good analyst*: good analysts don't need to remember everything, but they do need to be good at *finding answers* and using them sensibly. In this spirit, you have one assignment. Specifically, you'll write a paper where you derive a research question you find interesting and *apply* the statistical



concepts we cover to answer questions about a real, existing policy. Here is the breakdown of your course grade. The class is broken up into two sections: in the first section, we go over basic probability, correlation, and regression. The remainder of the class covers research for policy analysis.

- 35% of your grade comes from the first draft of the paper, 15% question and 20% draft.
- 60% for the final paper and presentation (respectively, 30 percent each), and
- 5% for attendance.

You will discuss the justification for the policy (including *why* we should care about understanding its effects). You'll gather real data on the policy of interest (including information on the primary variables of interest, relevant predictors/covariates), and outcomes you'll focus on. Finally, after you've defined the research question as well as collected and cleaned your dataset, you'll use the statistical tools we cover (probability theory, descriptive statistics, and regression) to discuss the effects of the policy or intervention. The paper you produce must ask a causal question where there is at least one intervention of interest.

In many senses, public policy is a catch all term covering various disciplines. Public health scholars may care about how banning of abortion in Texas affected fertility rates, or how COVID-19 vaccine/mask mandates affected the COVID-19 case rate per capita compared to other jurisdictions that did not enact these policies. Criminologists may care about how the building of Cop City affected how many people are shot by police, or how a state legalizing cannabis affects crime rates or the consumption of alcohol. Policy historians may care about how Pinochet's 1973 economic policies affected the GDP of Chile or about how Britain's National Health Service of 1948 affected infant mortality. Economists may ask how Hurricane Katrina affected the economy of New Orleans. Environmental scholars may care about how [a train derailment](#) affected housing prices. These of course are just some fields; increasingly, advanced empirical methods are used in the business sector and government. Given the array of areas and topics that policy touches, I don't care about what policy or research question you choose to study. To quote Noam Chomsky (who was quoting another MIT professor), the important part isn't what we cover in class; it is about what we discover. The only two stipulations I have is that your research question/outcomes must be 1) quantifiable with **accessible** data that you can use and also must 2) be interesting to you.

1.2 Additional Details

1. If I feel the concept is important, it'll be in the lecture notes or we will discuss it. I will also assign external readings to be done before class.
2. There is no required textbook (aside from this one!) for this course. Various free textbooks exist such as [Introductory Econometrics with R](#), [Introductory Statistics](#), [Intro to Modern Statistics](#), [Regression and Other Stories](#), [Intro to Econometrics](#), [Intro to Political Science Research Methods](#), and [many others](#). The Policy Department at Georgia

State also recommends [Introduction to Research Methods](#) or [Research Methods for the Social Sciences](#). The corresponding lecture will focus on the content that each respective chapter covers. Note that these books cover different aspects of the course in different levels of depth (Gelman's book *Regression and Other Stories* is obviously mainly about regression, one of the last math topics we cover, whereas the others are more rudimentary).

3. The same is true for software— I don't care which of these you use, but the only ones I know well are Stata, Python, and (to a lesser degree) R. For Stata users, [Statalist](#) is a great resource for Stata. R also is backed by a vast statistician community. I will sometimes include code blocks for Stata and Python in the text.

1.3 Helpful Notes from Me

1. Sun Tzu [said](#) every battle is won before it is fought. To reverse the perspective, as Ben Franklin said, if you fail to prepare, prepare to fail. The fact that the paper is the only assignment you have, in effect, means that I expect quality questions, idea, and analyses written in a professional manner. I do not expect perfection, or material at a level beyond the main content, but preparation is your best friend in this course.
2. As corollary to the preceding points, please *do* contact me if you have questions. Policy data analysis is what I do in my research every day. I love what I do, and I love discussing this topic with others. If you have any questions about the ideas we cover in class or have any difficulties, you may always meet with me or contact me otherwise. Thinking of your research question early, asking me for feedback, and so on helps more the earlier you talk to me.
3. Do not simply communicate with me. In addition, feel free to communicate with your classmates. This is something I only really learned the value of as a PHD student, so I figured I would advise the same to you. As an extension of this, I will consider allowing for collaboration on the final paper in groups of two, *with my permission*. For such papers to be considered, I must hear the research question well in advance, as well as the exact ideas on the data, analysis, and relevance of the question overall.
4. As you'll see by skimming the sections of EPA, I frequently use graphics that I construct from real datasets which I link to. On my GitHub page, you'll find these datasets, and more, [linked](#) to their descriptions. In lieu of finding your own dataset, you may use any of these for your class paper, should you wish.

1.4 Class Schedule

Below is the schedule. All readings for Econometrics for Policy Analysis (EPA) should be done before class. The other book chapters (unless I write otherwise) are optional.

1.4.1 Week 1

- 08-26-2024 (Monday)

Introductions and EPA, C2

- 08-28-2024 (Wednesday)

Required: EPA C3.

Optional: [IS C2](#), [IS C3](#) (skim), [IDS C2](#), [IDS C3](#), especially “Discrete Probability” and “Random Variables”.

A refresher on averages. Also covers t-tests, standard errors, and confidence intervals

1.4.2 Week 2

- 09-02-2024 (Monday)

University holiday. No class.

- 09-04-2024 (Wednesday)

Basic Asymptotic Theory (the Law of Large Numbers, Law of Iterated Expectations, and the Central Limit Theorem)

1.4.3 Week 3

- 09-09-2024 (Monday)
- 09-11-2024 (Wednesday)

Correlation, Coefficients, and Association (EPA, C3)

Here we cover basic correlation in 2 Dimensions, mainly using scatterplots and contingency tables.

1.4.4 Week 4

- 09-16-2024 (Monday)

Required: Watch this: [Partial Derivatives OLS Explained](#)

Optional: (ROS, C7), [IS](#), [C10](#). Also, Inference for OLS (Gauss-Markov Assumptions). **Today, the research question is due.**

- 09-18-2024 (Wednesday)

Gauss-Markov Assumptions (from the previous chapter)

1.4.5 Week 5

- 09-23-2024 (Monday)

Panel Data

- 09-25-2024 (Wednesday)

Intro to Treatment Effects

1.4.6 Week 6

- 09-30-2024 (Monday) Required: Data Types and Measurement (EPA, C5) Optional: [RMSS](#), [C6](#)

Data Gathering/Cleaning (Sampling, Measurement)

- 10-02-2024 (Wednesday)

Data Visualization

1.4.7 Week 7

- 10-07-2024 (Monday)

Writing for Policy Analysis: The Introduction and Literature Review

- 10-09-2024 (Wednesday)

Writing for Policy Analysis: The Background

1.4.8 Week 8

- 10-14-2024 (Monday)

Writing for Policy Analysis: Data

- 10-16-2024 (Wednesday)

Writing for Policy Analysis: Methods

1.4.9 Week 9

- 10-21-2024 (Monday)

Writing for Policy Analysis: Results and Conclusions

- 10-23-2024 (Wednesday)

First Draft Due, Presentations begin.

1.4.10 Week 10

- 10-28-2024 (Monday)
- 10-30-2024 (Wednesday)

1.4.11 Week 11

- 11-04-2024 (Monday)
- 11-06-2024 (Wednesday)

1.4.12 Week 12

- 11-11-2024 (Monday)
- 11-13-2024 (Wednesday)

1.4.13 Week 13

- 11-18-2024 (Monday)
- 11-20-2024 (Wednesday)

1.4.14 Week 14

- 12-02-2024 (Monday)
- 12-04-2024 (Wednesday)

1.4.15 Week 15

- 12-09-2024 (Monday)
- 12-11-2024 (Wednesday)

1.4.16 Week 16

- 12-16-2024 (Monday)

2 Data and Policy Studies

2.1 What is This Thing Called Science?

Science at its core is a process we use to understand observable phenomena. It is based on using logic and observations of the senses to form coherent and simple understandings about the world. Data, or a collection of observations, is fundamental to being able to conduct scientific research. We use data in our daily lives to make conclusions; we don't call it as such, but we do. Note here that data is not a living, breathing concept: it requires interpretation by us. We use principles of science to interpret data and the analyses we conduct upon data. As we learn in middle and high school, science typically begins with asking questions or defining a problem.

Suppose our current problem involves commute time to school or work, and we don't wish to walk. In this case, that's our question: "What's the ideal way to get to school/work?" We then gather information. Chances are we may use Google Maps or Waze to guide us. In this context, these tools provide us with the information we need, namely, *estimates* of how long our commute will be. And, assuming we wish to get to our destination as fast as possible, we make *inferences* or conclusions about the ideal way to take based on the GPS' options. If GPS says the highway takes 15 minutes but the backstreets which avoid highways take 35 minutes, we will typically elect to use the highway since that takes us to our destination the quickest.

There's still two more steps to do, though: test our hypothesis and draw conclusions about the actual observed facts. This means that we must, in real life, leave home and take the way we decide to take. When we get to our destination, we form conclusions about how actually taking the highway went. Of course, we repeat this idea multiple times; eventually, we "typically" take a certain direction to work or school precisely because we have the expectation the highway way will, on average, be preferable to *alternative* ways. This is a simple example, yet it illustrates the central point: in scientific inquiry, we ask questions, draw on available information, form ideas, take actions based on that information, and draw conclusions or plan accordingly based on testing the validity of that observed information. We don't call this science in daily life, but that's exactly what it is. The steps I've outlined so far are present in every field from public policy to physics, albeit with a little more sophistication.

As I've mentioned above, a collection of observations about a set of phenomena is what we call data. Thus, in public policy analysis, data is central to all that we do. One may ask why using data matters at all; the simple reason is that it allows us to resolve disagreements. While people may conduct different data analyses and obtain different results and even reach

different conclusions, the main idea is that we can look into the real world and obtain concepts that map on to metrics that we think are important and test them against our expectations. After all, everyone can have opinions or views on things, but the useful part is *testing out* our expectations against reality. That way, we can have a better sense of what's more likely to be true if a certain policy happens/is passed.

Traditionally, data analysis in the policy space has three goals in mind. The first is descriptive analysis of a phenomenon or topic. In this setting, we simply use raw or lightly transformed data to visualize understanding or relationships between variables (broadly, this is called analysis of variance). For example, we may ask (the classic political science question of) why some countries are wealthy or more developed and others poor/underdeveloped. We could classify *units of analysis* (schools, cities, states, or any other entity) by some criteria (Global South, Southern United States, New England, Metro Atlanta) and compare different metrics of income between them. We may take the average income of each unit and make graphics which show disparities between them. At a deeper level, we may wish to explain the factors which lead to these disparities. So say for cities, we may wish to understand how urbanicity, distance to the capital of the state, age composition, racial composition, and political status of the mayor explains variation in income levels for that city or a set of cities. These sorts of studies can help us point out disparities (for example, maybe cities of the United States that are mostly black or Native American in racial composition have 10,000 less dollars compared to mostly white areas) or identify broader trends. A second goal of policy analysis is prediction. A common problem in macroeconomics is the forecasting of GDP trends. Of course, the only way we may do this is by collecting data on GDP or some other measure we can observe across time and applying statistical techniques to try and predict how GDP/unemployment trends would look under a certain set of assumptions.

A third need for data in policy analysis is for the purposes of estimating the impact of some policy or intervention on some outcomes. Recall the example from the syllabus of Proposition 99, where California wished to reduce tobacco smoking. This intervention raises an immediate question for policy analysis: namely, “what was the *effect* of this intervention on the actual smoking rates we see?” This is a question [we may collect tobacco sales data](#) on, for at least California. After data collection (or even prior, in this case), we can form hypotheses. A hypothesis is a declarative/interrogative, testable statement about the world. It is like a hypothetical in the sense that we try to imagine the effect of a policy on an outcome so that we can answer questions about it. Here, we can hypothesize that Proposition 99 has a *negative* impact on tobacco smoking. Negative here is not intended in the normative sense; presumably most people reading this do not smoke (tobacco, anyways) or think that smoking is wrong or immoral. Instead, here “negative” means that the policy might decrease the tobacco sales per capita compared to what they would have been otherwise. To test this, we can use statistical analysis to compare California to other states that didn't do the policy.

The plot shows the cigarette pack sales per 100,000 for California from the years 1970 to 2000 (our dependent variable). The thick black line denotes the observed values for California,



and the vertical black reference line shows the year that [Proposition 99](#) (the independent variable/treatment) was passed. As I mentioned above, we typically wish to produce an estimate of California's cigarette consumption in the years following 1989, had Proposition 99 never been passed. This line is denoted by the red dashed line. After we do our analyses/estimations, we can discuss what the implications are. In other words, was the policy effective by some appreciable margin? Are there other outcomes concerns to consider?

2.2 4 Steps of Data Analysis

Broadly speaking, we can think of data analysis being broken into 5 distinct concepts. I summarize them below.

2.2.1 Identifying Policy Problems

As we've discussed above, the first step in this process is simply asking questions. What kind of questions? Policy questions. Knowing what specific questions to ask though can be tricky. Policy is a giant field. Of the thousands of questions we could ask, how do we know which ones will be the most pressing or timely? In other words, how do we know that this is a problem that policy *needs* to be enacted for? How can we identify programs whose analysis benefits the citizenry or other interested parties? Put simpler, who cares? Why do we want to do this study or answer this question? Who stands to benefit?

2.2.2 Gathering Data

Even once we've identified the problem, how do we go about gathering real data to answer questions? If we can't get data that speaks to the issues that we're concerned about, we can't obtain answers that are useful.

2.2.3 Cleansing Data

In real life, datasets do not come to us wrapped in a pretty bow ready for use. Cleaning data (or organizing it) can be a very messy affair in the best of times. In order for us to answer our questions, the data we obtain must be organized in a coherent way such that we can answer questions at all. If you wish to plot the trend lines of maternal mortality in Romania compared to 15 other nations and your data are not sorted by nation and time, **trust me**, the plot you'll get will not just look terrible, but you can't glean any trends or patterns from it. What's worse, you may not even know improper sorting is the cause of the problem until you bother to look at your dataset again. So, it is best to have good habits developed early.

2.2.4 Analyzing Data

For analysis, we apply statistical analysis in order to answer the questions we're asking, using the dataset we've now cleaned. Such techniques can range from simply descriptive statistical analysis to complex regression models. From such models, we sometimes wish to make inferences to a bigger population, but sometimes more specific statistics (e.g., the average treatment effect on the treated units) are of interest.

2.2.5 Presenting the Results

Now that we've done analysis, we can finally interpret what the findings mean. We attempt to draw conclusions based on our results and come up with avenues for future research or other relevant aspects of interest. In this section, we typically try and say why our findings are relevant.

2.3 Identifying Policy Problems

2.3.1 Justifications For Policy

Before we can do any analysis though, we have to take a step back. We have to ask ourselves how we know a problem exists in the first place. There are two broad justifications that policy is based on: negative externalities and social good, but the main point of both justifications is "*harm*".

2.3.2 Externalities

The idea of externalities [comes from](#) microeconomic theory, which says that efficient markets will affect only those parties who willingly participate in transactions. Particularly in the case of negative externalities, or externalities which harm others, we could use public policy to rectify this.

Consider a very simple example: seatbelts. In physics, any force that is not stopped by an equal, opposite force will keep going. So, if you're in a car crash while driving at 60 miles per hour while unbuckled, the car stops. You, however, don't stop: you keep going, 60 miles per hour through the windshield. No public policy is needed just yet. So far, any cost that comes from a transaction has been borne by you, the driver. By the way, I'm not kidding: one of the arguments against seatbelts [was literally](#) that using seatbelts should be a personal decision *if* it does not put others at risk. Additionally, [industry](#) also argued against mandatory seatbelt laws on the grounds that it was the government interfering between the transactions of a consumer and the seller.

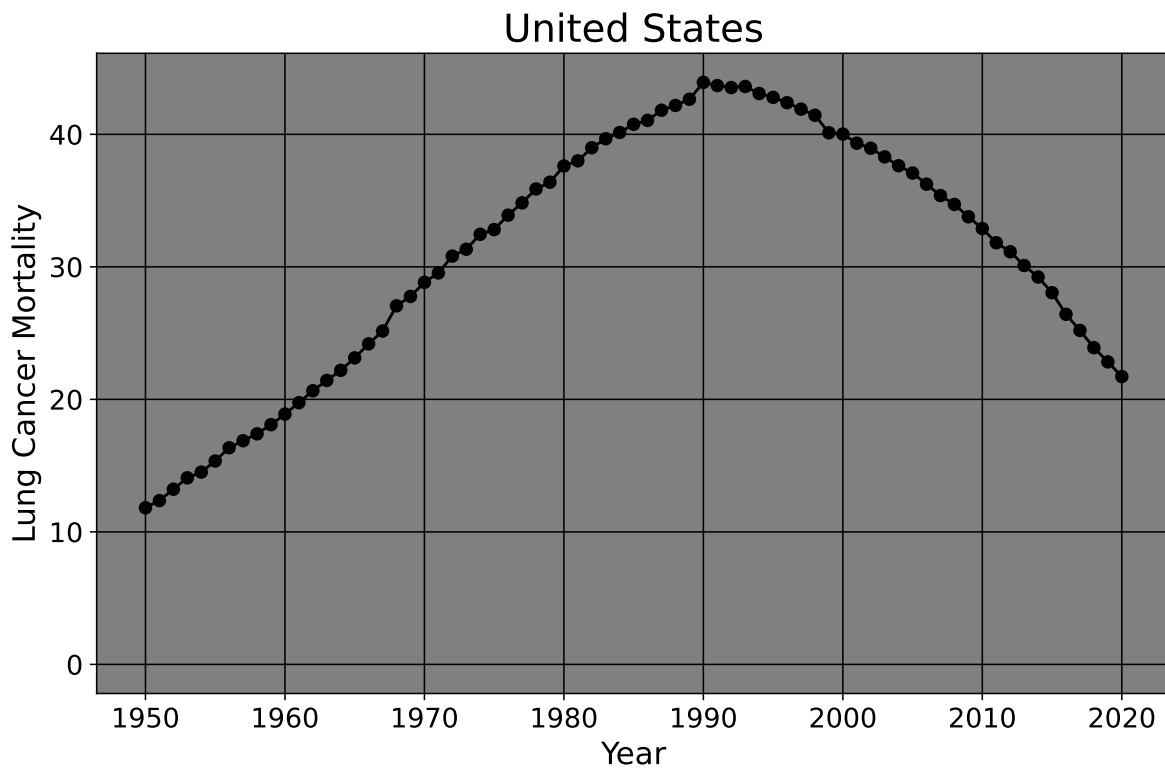
However, there are a few issues with the externality argument. Firstly, being unbuckled turns you into a human projectile. You can hit your passengers or even others outside your vehicle if you're unbuckled. Your market exchange (you buying the car and driving it) is now potentially having second-order effects on others by you not using a seatbelt. So, the government may wish to mandate seatbelts while driving in order to prevent these negative externalities which come in the form of medical bills or death. To address the argument of industry above, that seatbelt laws would raise costs of production, this raises an important moral dilemma: does the harm caused to the business of having to install seatbelts matter more than the human harm caused by a society where seatbelts are optional? Also, we are human beings. We have imperfect knowledge. We know for fact that we don't have all the answers, to paraphrase Socrates. We also don't know if the actions we do will ultimately hurt someone else. We live in a probabilistic world (which we will return to later). Indeed, we could argue against laws banning DUI in precisely this manner, saying that we don't know if the intoxicated driver will harm someone until they do. But, as with seatbelts, we never know if there will be another passenger on the road or a child playing in the street. So, we rarely know if we're *actually* putting peoples' lives in danger by driving drunk or unbuckled. We can't know if an externality will occur until it does, usually. Thus, the next view (social good) adopts a different form of reasoning.

2.3.3 Social Good

Moreover, the externality justification isn't typically the way we think about things from a public policy perspective. Usually, we have social welfare goals in mind. This can come in the form of harm reduction or prevention measures. When we argue for public education, for example, we typically don't do so because we think that the private schools won't educate citizens enough (even though they won't), and that public school will be to decrease inefficient education markets. In fact, we typically don't think of education (in our formative years anyways) as a market at all. We usually argue for public education because we think that education has *inherent* benefits, and that being denied a certain level of education necessitates an inherent harm. Imagine for a moment how the literacy rate of the United States would look if school was completely optional. We likely would not complain about GDP loss, we'd likely complain about a society where lots of people can't read the cereal box or function within society in a decent manner. In other words, society has a vested interest in keeping people safe, educated, and healthy to some degree. So we mandate seatbelt laws, basic schooling, and other laws/regulations in service of these ends. Importantly, "these ends" *does not* have a right or wrong answer. The goals of policy are ultimately decided by people within the society. However, knowing the goals of a policy and reasons for its existence helps us ask meaningful questions about it. Following the above discussion, a natural research question that follows is "How did seatbelt laws affect the rate of car accident injuries and deaths?"

2.3.4 Why Is Tobacco a Problem?

As we've discussed above, harm or necessity is typically a standard we look to in order to determine if policy is needed. As I've mentioned, California passed Proposition 99 in 1989 to reduce smoking rates. But, how did we know there was a problem to begin with? To do this, we can grab data on lung cancer mortality rates from 1950 until today. Presumably, of course, we view lung cancer as harmful and something we wish to prevent.



The shaded area represents the period before any state-wide anti-tobacco legislation was passed in the United States. We can see quite clearly the age-standardized lung cancer mortality rates rose in a fairly linear manner in the United States. However, the curve is parabolic; mortality rates were rising every single year until the zenith in 1990. Mortality began to fall when the first large scale anti-tobacco laws were passed. Of course, the *degree* to which these laws were the cause of this decrease is an empirical question (especially since lung cancer develops over time, the decrease after 1990 suggests other things may have also contributed to the decline in behaviors that led to the decrease in mortality). However, given the clear increase in lung cancer rates and other obvious harms of tobacco smoking in the preceding decades, policymakers in California and the voters, in fact, became increasingly hostile to tobacco smoking in public and in other crowded areas. So, California passed legislation in 1988 (as did at least a dozen other states from 1988 to 2000) to decrease smoking rates.

Had I not plotted this trend line, people (from the tobacco industry in 1970, for example) could simply say “Well, nobody *knows* if lung cancer mortality is a problem. How do we know if there’s a problem here? I don’t think one exists.” This plot makes a powerful case that lung cancer is indeed a problem which must be addressed due to the persistent rise in mortality. Data in other words provides intellectual self-defense; if you posit that a problem exists, then this should be demonstrable using datasets that speak to the issue at hand. As a consequence of this, if a problem does exist (be it tobacco smoking or [the impact of racial incarceration/arrest disparities](#)), we can then look for policies that attempt to mitigate or solve the problem. That way, we can go about doing analysis to see which policies are the most effective.

3 Summary

At this point, it's clear that data and data analysis are critical to public policy. It allows us to visualize trends, identify the effects of interventions, and reach conclusions on the basis of this evidence. However, the “how” we reach conclusions part matters, since the methodology we use to reach conclusions fundamentally affects what we can conclude in the very first place. The next two lectures cover probability and asymptotic theory; these form the foundations of quantitative public policy analysis.

Part I

Mathematics and Econometric Theory

4 Basic Probability Theory

Human beings are awestruck at uncertainty in everyday life. In the elder days, the Greeks consulted Oracles at Delphi, the Vikings Seers, the samurai onmyōji, and, more recently, horoscopes/birth charts to make sense of happenings. Of these, however, only one has taken the throne of mathematical statistics: probability. Probability is a formalized system which allows us, under differing philosophies (Frequentism and Bayesianism), to rigorously make sense of events that occur.

More concretely, probability is a measure of the likelihood that an event will occur. It ranges from 0 to 1, where 0 indicates impossibility and 1 indicates certainty. Generally, there are two kinds of probabilities econometricians and policy analysts are concerned with: discrete random variables and continuous random variables. Why *random*? Well, because the event *may occur or not*. If a coin had only heads, only tails, or a die only had the number 1 on it, there's no uncertainty anymore and probability wouldn't be needed. But in real life, outcomes are essentially never guaranteed. *Discrete* random variables have finite values they can take on. (heads or tails for the coin). By extension, a continuous random variable can take on infinitely many values. Suppose we have data on the width of a coke can or the amount of time in minutes spent studying. These are uncountable in the sense that they can have so many different values that they can't be easily counted.

To fix ideas, let's begin with the idea of a sample space, which we denote by the uppercase Greek letter "Omega", Ω . This represents the set of all possible outcomes for some *instance* or experiment. For example, suppose we have a die of 3 sides numbered 1, 2, and 3, which we cast to see what number faces up. In our case, $\Omega = \{1, 2, 3\}$. Any collection of these outcomes we call events. How then do we assign probability to this event? Say we ask for the probability of getting an odd number for a singular die cast, or $A = \{1, 3\}$. What are the odd numbers in 1, 2, 3? 1 and 3. Since there are two of these, over three possible outcomes, the probability is just two-thirds. Formally, the way we'd write this is

$$\mathbb{E}[\mathbf{1}\{A\}] = 1 \times P(A) + 0 \times P(A') = (2) \frac{1}{3} + 0 = \frac{2}{3}$$

Here, A is our event of interest (getting a 1 or 3), and A' (*not A*) is the probability of A not occurring.

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Probability is rarely used in a vacuum, though. We typically, in the policy sciences, wish to take a given outcome from a set of outcomes and draw conclusions from it. To do this, we use descriptive statistics (also called *moments*).

4.1.1 Means: Arithmetic and Median

The first moment is called the **average/arithmetic mean**. The formula for the mean, also called the *expected value* (denoted by \mathbb{E}) is

$$\bar{x} = \mathbb{E}[X] = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{i=1}^N x_i$$

where \bar{x} is the mean, N is the number of values, and x_i represents the i -th value in the sequence. The uppercase Greek letter “sigma” means summation, or $\sum_{i=1}^N x_i$. It adds the values from $i = 1$ to N . For a discrete random variable, the expected value is

$$\mathbb{E}[X] = \sum_{i=1}^N x_i \cdot P(x_i).$$

So for our die, the expected value is

$$\mathbb{E}[X] = 1 \cdot \frac{1}{3} + 2 \cdot \frac{1}{3} + 3 \cdot \frac{1}{3} = \frac{1+2+3}{3} = 2$$

For a coin, the expected value (assuming it is fair) is 0.5. Suppose we have a room of 10 men and 40 women, where women take the value of 1 and men the value of 0. The average number of women in the room is $\frac{40}{50}$. This means the expected value of women in the room is .8. In other words, if we randomly selected a person from the room 10 times, we’d expect about 8 of them to be women. We can take averages with things aside from die and coins too. Naturally, if the amount of water in one giant jug was 5 liters and in another jug there is 7 liters, the average liters of water in the sample is $\frac{1}{N} \sum_{i=1}^N x_i = \frac{1}{2} \sum_{i=1}^2 5 + 7 = 6$ liters.

The median, or the middle number, is also a type of average. It is less influenced by outliers than the average is. Suppose we have a dataset of years of education across a group of people in a neighborhood, $A = \{5, 6, 7, 9, 18\}$. The middle number here is 7 (since two numbers lie to the left and right of 7). But let’s consider the issue deeper: suppose we were to use the average years of education at the average. For us, we have

$$\frac{1}{5} \times \sum_{i=1}^5 5 + 6 + 7 + 9 + 18 = \frac{45}{5} = 9$$

The mean and median produce differing values. If we were to use the mean, we'd conclude the average person in this sample is in high school. When in fact, as a raw number, the modal respondent is a middle schooler with one elementary schooler. Thus, we can see that the average is influenced by outliers (in this case, somebody in graduate school). The classic joke is that when Bill Gates walks into a bar, everyone, *on average*, is a billionaire.

4.1.2 Variance

The **variance** is the second moment. For a random variable X , the variance is denoted $\text{Var}(X)$, measures the spread of its values around the mean. For a discrete random variable, it is calculated as: $\text{Var}(X) = \mathbb{E}[(X - \mathbb{E}[X])^2]$. Naturally, if all numbers in a set are the same [e.g., $A = \{5, 5\}$], there's no variance (and the mean is just that number, as one would expect). For our die, the variance is:

$$\text{Var}(X) = \frac{1}{3}[(1-2)^2 + (2-2)^2 + (3-2)^2] = \frac{1}{3}[1 + 0 + 1] = \frac{2}{3}.$$

The sample variance is

$$s^2 = \frac{1}{N-1} \sum_{i=1}^N (x_i - \bar{x})^2.$$

The subtracting of 1 is called [Bessel's correction](#) because it factors in uncertainty. Some might wonder why we're squaring these differences. The main reason here is because it penalizes outliers, or datapoints that are far from the mean. For example, let's say that we have three people's years of education, $A = \{1, 2, 15\}$. The average of this is 3. Person 1 and 2 are only 2 and 1 year less than the mean. But someone with 15 years of education varies a lot more from the mean, since a junior in college has 12 more years of school than a third grader. So, we square the large difference to penalize this disparity.

The square root of our variance is what's called the standard deviation from the mean. It is a measure of how much the sample data deviate from the mean. This will become more apparent when we discuss probability distributions below.

4.2 Hypothesis Testing

In public policy we oftentimes wish to test hypotheses. A hypothesis is a statement about the world that we wish to determine the validity of. For example, we could hypothesize that the average math score for a school is 86, or we can hypothesize that black people use welfare less than white people. We are always testing our hypothesis (which we call the research hypothesis, H_R) against a scenario where this hypothesis is wrong (the null hypothesis, H_0).

That is, we start off by assuming the math score is not different from 86 or that blacks and whites use welfare at the same rates. We only change our minds in light of compelling evidence. If this confuses you, imagine we had a courtroom where the burden of proof is now shifted on the defense to prove their client innocent. We would never be okay with presuming guilt. No, we'd say that the people making the positive claim are the ones who must supply enough evidence to convince us otherwise. In research, one way doing this is by using something called a t-test.

4.2.1 One Group T-Test

First we cover the one-sample t-test, where we compare our research hypothesis against some known/predefined statistic. If I ask you what you think the average literacy rate is in the population of Americans, you may give different answers like "I think it's at the 9th grade level", "I think the average literacy level is less than the 6th grade level" or "I think the average literacy rate is different from 0". Each of these forms sets of testable hypotheses. In the first case, H_R is "The literacy rate is equal to 9th grade." In the second case, H_R is "The literacy rate is less than the 6th grade level." Finally, we'd say H_R for case 3 is "I think the literacy rate in America is not 0" (or, some significant portion of the population can read). Formally, we denote these hypotheses as

$$H_R : L = 9$$

$$H_R : L < 6$$

$$H_R : L \neq 0.$$

Our corresponding null hypotheses (the ones we start by assuming) are

$$H_0 : L \neq 9$$

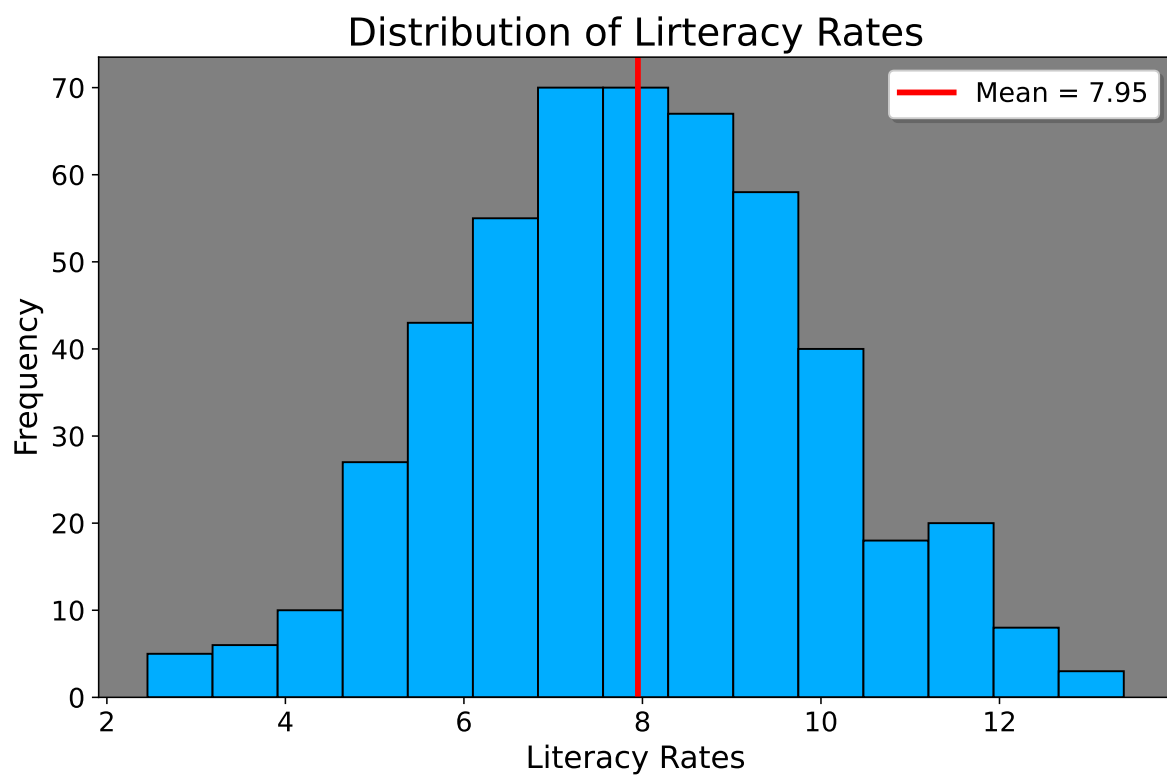
$$H_0 : L > 6$$

$$H_0 : L = 0.$$

we simply take a of sample the population somehow (which is usually taken care of for us in census data/compiled statistics). We then calculate the sample average of the grade level of our sample (ranging from 0 being illiterate and 16+ which means postgraduate). Let's visualize this.

This is a histogram. It shows a distribution of data. To better conceptualize it, imagine the height of the histogram (the y axis) represents the number of people in the data who take on the values on the x-axis. So, roughly 70 people have a literacy level of 8.

In this case I generated a sample of 500 people with a small amount of variance. The average literacy rate in this population is 8 (for 8th grade). We now wish to see if our population mean (of 8th grade) is different from the researcher mean (9, 6, and 0). To do this, we need what's



called a t-statistic, which is a measure of deviation from the mean *when taking into account* the standard deviation from the mean and sample size. The formula for this simple t-statistic is

$$t = \frac{\bar{x} - \mu_R}{\frac{s}{\sqrt{n}}}.$$

Let's parse these terms. In the numerator we take the difference of our sample mean (\bar{x} , the mean we in fact observe in our dataset) versus our hypothetical mean that we are testing our sample mean against, denoted as μ_R ("myoo-sub R"). The denominator is the standard error, which is the standard deviation divided by the square root of our sample size. For example, here's how we'd do this with the null hypothesis for 0 (that is, our sample mean is different from 0).

$$t = \frac{\bar{x} - \mu_R}{\frac{s}{\sqrt{n}}} = \frac{7.949 - 0}{\frac{1.9983}{\sqrt{500}}} = 88.95.$$

In other words, our average literacy grade level is 88 times that of what we would expect given our standard error.

4.2.2 Two-Group T-Test

We can also do a 2-group t-tests, where we wish to compare average group differences. We can compare men and women, one city to another city, one city to many cities, and so on. For our purposes though, we'll just compare one city to another one. I generate a sample of 20000 where one city has a mean of 6 and another of 14 with respective standard deviations of 1.5 and 3.

Here is how we'd calculate the t-statistic in this case.

$$t = \frac{\bar{x}_1 - \bar{x}_2}{\sqrt{\frac{s_1^2}{n_1} + \frac{s_2^2}{n_2}}}$$

where \bar{x} is the average mean of a city and s denotes the variance for each city. We plug in the values. For the denominator:

$$\sqrt{\frac{1.5}{10000} + \frac{3}{10000}} = \sqrt{\frac{1.5 + 3}{10000}} = \sqrt{\frac{4.5}{10000}} = \sqrt{0.00045}$$

which yields

$$\sqrt{0.00045} \approx 0.0212.$$

Now, calculate the t-statistic:



$$t = \frac{6 - 14}{0.0212} = \frac{-8}{0.0212} \approx -377.36$$

4.3 Uncertainty Around the Mean

Typically we are concerned with the uncertainty of our estimates. Uncertainty around the mean is typically expressed through **confidence intervals**. A confidence interval provides a range of values that, under certain conditions, contains the true population mean. Now we should distinguish between the population and sample statistics: the sample is that subset of the population that we can get. We can rarely sample every single American in the country (the population), but a random (or representative) sample of 3000 Americans, say, is just fine. This difference is important: outside of simulations, we never can get every single datapoint for all our interventions of interest. So, we collect a sample which approximates that population.

4.3.1 Confidence Intervals and the Normal Distribution

To understand confidence intervals, it's essential to first grasp the role of a [normal/Gaussian distribution](#). The normal distribution is a continuous probability distribution characterized by its bell-shaped curve. We call it a continuous distribution because unlike coin flips, other data points can take on many values such as homicide rates, COVID-19 rates, and other metrics that can't be broken into simple, countable groups. Most real-world phenomena, when measured, tend to follow a normal distribution (we will return to this in the lecture on asymptotic theory). A normal distribution is defined by its mean (μ) and standard deviation (σ). The great thing about a normal distribution is that we can prove that 68 and 95% of the data lie within 1 and 2 standard deviations of the mean. We will exploit this fact to construct a confidence interval.

4.3.2 Constructing a Confidence Interval

The most common confidence interval is the 95% confidence interval. This means that if we were to take many samples and construct confidence intervals for each of them, approximately 95% of these intervals would contain the true population mean. Typically, we have only one sample to work with (and we rely on asymptotics to argue for the validity of our confidence intervals), but methods such as bootstrapping (where we simulate many such samples) may be employed to do this too. For our current purposes though, we construct a confidence interval for the population mean μ , we use the sample mean \bar{x} and the standard error of the mean as we've defined them above.

For a 95% confidence interval, we use the critical value from the standard normal distribution, typically denoted as t^* . For a 95% confidence level, $t^* \approx 1.96$ ([since](#) approximately 95% of the

values lie within 1.96 standard deviations from the mean in a standard normal distribution). If the t-statistics from our t-tests (such as the ones from above) are greater, in absolute value, than 1.96, we typically interpret this as a major difference from the null hypothesis (that there's no relationship/the means are not significantly different). Note, 95% CIs do not mean 95% of the sample data lies within this interval. Confidence intervals are statements about the mean. Instead, it means that if we were to take many samples and construct intervals in the same way for a mean of interest, 95% of those intervals would contain the true population mean. We usually interpret confidence intervals that contain 0 (say, [-1,1]) as being insignificant. By extension, if the CI does not contain 0 (say, [3,5]), we say it is significantly different from 0 (or, that the means are much different from one another).

4.3.2.1 One Group T-Test CI

I generated a 10,000 person sample of incomes (in 1000s). The true average is 50. We think the average is 60. The standard deviation is the square root of 2. To estimate the confidence interval, we compute

$$0.0277 = 1.96 \times \frac{\sqrt{2}}{\sqrt{10000}}$$

to get our standard error of the mean. Now, in order to characterize the range that the mean falls within, we simply do

$$CI = \mu \pm \text{Margin of Error} = 50 \pm 0.0277 = (49.986, 50.014).$$

We interpret this as “Our sample mean is 50 thousand dollars. We are 95% confident that given the data, the real mean lies between 49.986 and 50.014 thousand dollars.” Since both these numbers are less than 60, our research hypothesis ($H_R = 60$) is likely incorrect, as 60 does not fall within these estimates.

4.3.2.2 Two-Group T-Test CI

Now, we can revisit the city example using product weight from the above and see if the means significantly differ. We typically use this kind of t-test in situations where we wish to compare one group to another. The formula for the CI for the difference between two means is given by:

$$CI = (\bar{x}_1 - \bar{x}_2) \pm t \times \sqrt{\frac{s_1^2}{n_1} + \frac{s_2^2}{n_2}}$$

We know the values from the above, so we plug them in. We also use the critical value of 1.96, since this is the value we use for a 95% CI. First we compute the standard error using the

variances and sample sizes for both groups:

$$SE = \sqrt{\frac{1.5}{10000} + \frac{3}{10000}} = \sqrt{\frac{4.5}{10000}} = \sqrt{0.00045} \approx 0.0212.$$

We now have a margin of error (using the critical value 1.96 as above) of:

$$\text{Margin of Error} = t \times SE = 1.96 \times 0.0212 \approx 0.0413$$

We already know the mean difference is -8, so now we just plug that in and solve:

$$CI = (-8) \pm 0.0413.$$

So, the 95% confidence interval for the difference in means is:

$$(-8 - 0.0413, -8 + 0.0413) = (-8.0413, -7.9587).$$

This interval suggests that City 1 consumes significantly less, on average, than City 2. By the way, for those curious, if we just reversed the order of the numerator, we'd get the same result but it would be (7.9587, 8.0413), where we'd say that City 2 consumes significantly more than City 1.

4.4 A Brief Word on Practical Significance

To conclude, a word of caution: as we can see, the magnitude of the t-statistic and tightness of the CIs tend to scale with sample size. Consider the two group case:

$$t = \frac{\bar{x}_1 - \bar{x}_2}{\sqrt{\frac{s_1^2}{n_1} + \frac{s_2^2}{n_2}}}.$$

We can see that an increase in the sample size leads to a decrease in the overall denominator. Suppose for the denominator $s^2 = 4$ for both groups. If both groups have the size of 40, then we just have $\sqrt{.1 + .1}$. But if both groups have a sample size of 400, then we have $\sqrt{.01 + .01}$. The reason this matters is because researchers oftentimes interpret the t-statistic and whether it's greater than 1.96 as a measure of practical importance. But this is wrong! Since our t-statistic is guaranteed to increase with sample size, per the formulae above, at certain sample sizes it would be hard for our confidence intervals to NOT contain 0/be significantly different.

What this means as a matter of practicality is to always keep in mind your sample size and what would matter practically to people in real life. If you estimate that the price of one brand of bottled water, for example, costs 0.05 dollars more than another brand across all 50 states, and your t-statistic is 70 and your CI is [0.01, 0.06], then do not claim (in isolation

anyways) that this difference is very meaningful or earth-shattering, since they make either a penny more or 6 cents more. In other words, the findings are statistically significant, but practically they are meaningless. The only way for this to really matter to anyone is by having some metric about how much each brand sold (in terms of individual water bottles) for us to reach any firm conclusion about how much this average difference matters. I say this because I do not want for you, in real life or in your papers, to apply these ideas mechanically. I want you to always keep in mind how statistics maps on to the real world.

5 Summary

Probability is the stepping stone into using statistical methods. It is the foundation of decisionmaking in business, economics, and policy analysis. For many, the concepts covered here will be new material—indeed, the term “statistics” or “data analysis” can be intimidating to people at first glance.

I believe the best way to introduce these topics is to keep a balanced perspective between mathematics and application. However, this course only scratches the very surface; the world of quantitative methods in policy analysis is a big one. For those of you interested in graduate school or who wish to use statistics for your future job, your mastery of this essential material will not be in vain.

6 Asymptotic Theory

Across the earth, there are around 7.5 sextillion sand grains across all beaches and deserts. However, mathematics isn't bound by Earthly constraints. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, probability and statistics is about quantifying uncertainty in order to draw conclusions. However, it is now time to understand the very basics under which we *can* draw conclusions to start with. To do this, we investigate basic asymptotic theory. It is the very underpinning of statistics, in particular explaining the circumstances under which we can be confident about our estimates. We defined confidence intervals rather quickly in the previous lecture. Here, we will add to your toolkit with which to understand when they are valid.

6.1 Law of Iterated Expectations

Suppose we wish to commute to and from Georgia State University from Marietta, Georgia. As we've discussed in the previous chapter, we can think of some variable c (commute time) as a random variable, as its value is not guaranteed until we actually leave home and arrive. Suppose we are now interested in the average time it takes us to arrive using I-75 South, conditional on us taking the South or North depending on our starting point. We think I-75 South will take 15 minutes, compared to I-75 North which we think will take 20. We can formalize this also as $x = \{1, 0\}$, where we take North being coded as 1, else as 0 if we take South. So, we leave home (or school) using either highway, and record how long it took to get to the destination. Say, we record the value of 30 minutes in the morning and 40 in the afternoon. Do we conclude that this is how long it takes to get to school on average, and that we should use some other interstate? No. Why not? This is only one estimate from one day. There are all kinds of things that could have been going on in the morning or afternoon that might influence your travel time, most notably traffic, construction, or other random events for any given path we choose. So, what are we left to do? The only thing we can do, is collect more data.

So suppose we take this same highway for one month, using only 75 South and North (unlike say I-285). We record the amount of time it took us to get to school and home that day using either way (that is, we record our commute time to and from school each day for both ways, taking the average separately for each week). Mathematically, we express this as the expected commute time conditional on the chosen route x : $\mathbb{E}[c|x = 1]$ (expected commute time given we take North) and $\mathbb{E}[c|x = 0]$ (expected commute time given we take South). The *Law of Iterated Expectations* (LIE) states that the overall expected commute time for I-75 (to Marietta,

anyways) is the average of these conditional expectations, weighted by how often each route was taken. Formally: $\mathbb{E}[c] = \mathbb{E}[\mathbb{E}[c|x]]$. This means that the overall average commute time $\mathbb{E}[c]$ is the expected value of the conditional expectations $\mathbb{E}[c|x]$

So, if after a month of data collection, we find that the average commute time is 17 minutes, this is the unconditional expectation $\mathbb{E}[c]$, calculated by taking the average of the commute times across both routes across all days. This approach, where we repeatedly take the average of an outcome/variable given some condition (here, the route we take), reflects the Law of Iterated Expectations.

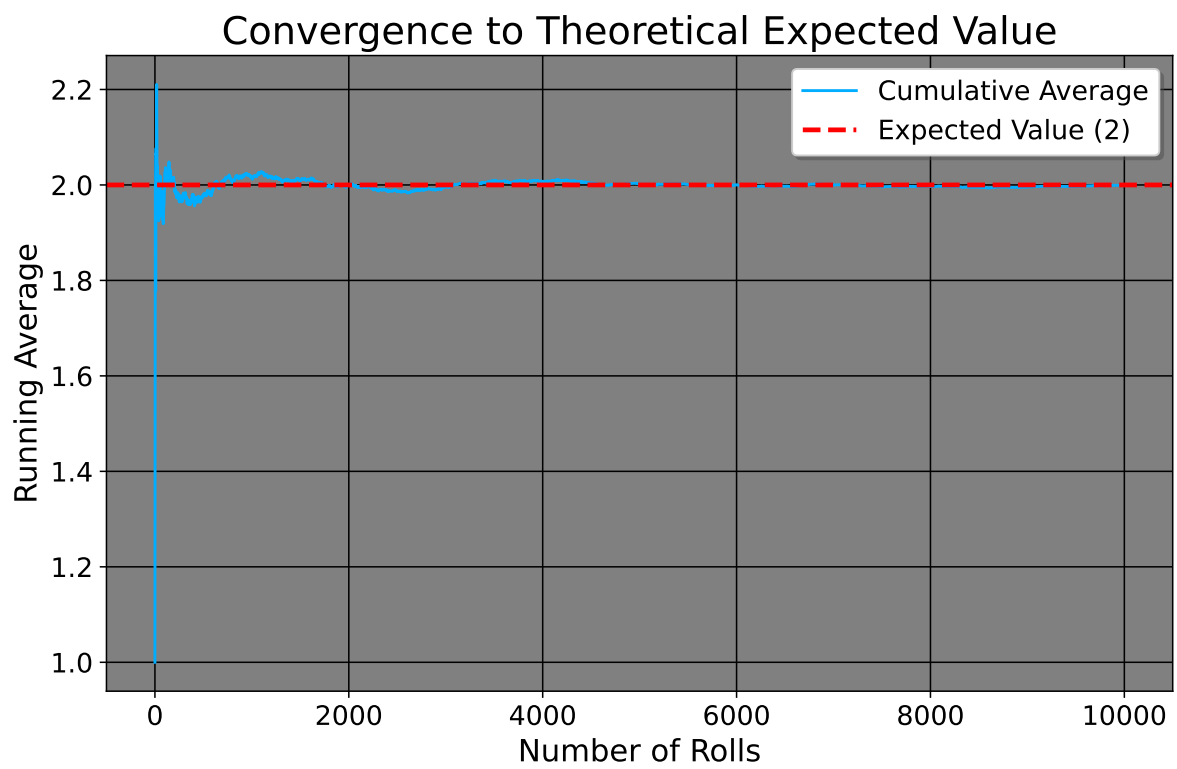
6.2 Law of Large Numbers

Why might this be true, though? Why, after taking all of the averages across a whole month do we arrive at 17, which is a lot closer to 15 than we first thought? Surely, this number is much quicker than the 30 minutes we took the first day? The reason for us getting this value is because of what we call the Law of Large Numbers, or

$$\lim_{N \rightarrow \infty} P \left(\left| \frac{1}{N} \sum_{i=1}^N x_i - \mu \right| < \epsilon \right) = 1.$$

Here is what the math says: as our sample size N increases without bound (that is, as we take the highway more and more and more and more and more... to an infinite amount of times), the probability that the average of our individual empirical daily commute times x_i approaches the *true* population value is 1. In other words, the more estimates we take, the closer, in probability, we come to our population estimate. You see, the first day of 30 minutes was simply a sample of 1. We had nothing else to base our ideas off of aside from whatever GPS tells us. Maybe there was traffic or some other unforeseen thing. However, as we take the highway more times, we tend to get a better sense of how long it'll take to get places, what lanes to use, and so on and so forth. To further prove this, the expected value of a three sided die numbered 1 to 3 is 2. If we cast the die three times and then take the average of what we get, we should see the cumulative empirical average converge to the theoretical average.

As it turns out, that's exactly what we do see. As researchers, what this means is that drawing from a large sample tends to be better than a small one for empirical. For example, if someone has a sample size of 20, we likely would not be okay with generalizing one particular aspect of this sample (say, weight or political affiliation) to everyone in the same city, as we'd need more data points to average over. Ideally, if we're trying to sample American public opinion, we don't want to use only 2 American states, ideally we'd have all the state data available to use.



6.3 Central Limit Theorem

By understanding the Law of Iterated Expectations (LIE) and the Law of Large Numbers (LLN), we can now delve into [the Central Limit Theorem \(CLT\)](#), which helps us characterize the overall distribution of commute times. That way, we can do things like calculate the confidence interval of our commute times, hoping it will approximate the true one. The CLT says:

$$\frac{\bar{x}_i - \mu}{\sigma/\sqrt{N}} \xrightarrow{d} N(0, 1)$$

or that as the sample size increases, the probability of our empirical distribution approaches a normal distribution. Aside from the distribution of our measurements, our sample mean, by LLN, approaches the population mean. If this seems at all abstract to you, we may simulate this. Here, I define the average commute time to be 15 with a standard deviation of about 3 minutes (between 12 and 18 minutes). I then simulate the commute time across 20000 commutes (since I didn't wish to drive down Interstate 75 20,000 times!). We can clearly see from the GIF that the empirical distribution (that is, the commute times we experience) quickly approaches the *true* population average time as we commute more and more.

This convergence supports the LLN, which tells us that our sample mean will approach the true mean $\mu = 15$ as we collect more data. Additionally, notice how our confidence intervals get tighter and tighter given an increase in sample size. Note that this result is intuitive: as we collect more data, it would make sense that we have a better picture about the underlying data (such as, the sample mean and variance). So, with this in mind, it makes sense that we have a better sense of our uncertainty of our estimates, as the confidence interval shows. So, with the commuting example, the first day took us a half hour. We suspected that the commute would be 15 and 20 minutes respectively (the expected value of which is 17.5 minutes). So, in terms of minutes, we could hypothesize that the true travel time takes between 15 minutes or 45 minutes. In other words, we're quite uncertain. But, as we collect more data, the uncertainty decreases, tightening to be around the true value.

Additionally, the CLT allows us to visualize how even if the original distribution of the variable is not normal (say, a coin toss where we only have two outcomes, heads or tails), the distribution, given enough samples, *converges* to a normal distribution. The plot above flips a coin 1000 times, plotting the empirical distribution after every 100 flips. We can see that the distribution, despite having only two outcomes, converges to a normal one. Thus, CLT allows us to construct confidence intervals and make inferences about a population, given a large enough sample.

6.4 Sampling

Before we continue however, we need to say a few words about sampling, and the idea of collecting a random, probabilistic sample versus a non-random sample. The reason this matters

is because no matter how we calculate our statistics, we need to be sure that our statistics can actually map on to the actual constructs we want them to. A random sample, in principle, is the idea that everyone from a given population has the same chance to be included in the sample for some study. For example, if we wanted to survey the public opinion of Georgia State students, one potential way of doing this would be to get every single active GSU email from the University and put it into a spreadsheet. We then could generate a variable in the spreadsheet called a “Bernoulli” variable, or a variable that takes on the values 0 or 1. We can then, after setting the number of observations (defined as the number of emails we have), define the probability with which a given variable takes on 0 or 1 to be 0.5. In other words, everyone has an equal chance of being included in the survey, 1 means you’re included, else 0. Note, there are other, much more sophisticated ways to do this, but this is one way of taking a random sample.

What would a non-random sample look like, then? Well, in principle it’s where everyone in the population does not have an equal chance of being included in the sample. But, this is a simple definition. It does not explain why it’s bad or why it’s harmful to researchers. So, let’s consider a few kinds of non-random sampling. The most obvious one is something called convenience sampling. As the name suggests, we take a sample based on whoever is around us. This can be in our class, on the street, or in our friend group. For example, I have two coworkers, one goes to MIT and the other went to Columbia, both for econ degrees. If I wanted to know how good the average person in the United States is at calculus or math, then I cannot simply assess their skillset and reach a conclusion. Why not? Well, MIT and Columbia are incredibly selective schools that *select for* math skills. Furthermore, the fact that I know them or work with them is likely correlated to my research interests which demand a good background in statistics/applied mathematics. Similarly, even if we personally randomly asked people on the street, this is still not a random sample. Why? Well, there are likely underlying reasons to people being in certain locations. If you’re in the biology department, it’s likely that most people you meet will have an uncanny knowledge about germ theory or anatomy. And we’d expect this, we’d say something’s wrong if these were not true.

At this point, you’re likely asking what any of this has to do with the previous discussion of asymptotic theory or policy analysis for that matter. Well, the sample we collect is directly related to the results that we obtain. If our goal is to approximate math knowledge in America, it’s inappropriate to only sample students from the engineering department at Georgia Tech or the economics students at Chicago. To say it differently: even if we did collect data from every single student at every single engineering department in the United States, this would map on to the population of engineering students, at best, *not* the United States as a whole. In statistics language, our estimate of the “true” mean would be biased, in this case significantly upwards. Even though our confidence intervals would be more precise as our sample size increases (that is, the more engineering students we ask), we would still never converge to the true parameter because our sample is so dissimilar to the population of people we care about, effectively giving us the right answer to the wrong question. When we discuss regression, the importance of sampling will become even more apparent, but for now suffice to say that it’s important that the sample be as representative of the underlying population as possible.

7 Summary

Asymptotic theory simplifies statistical analysis by encouraging us to think about the “true” population of interest. It provides us with tools to derive more accurate and precise estimates from. But, as a more general rule for policy analysis (and life), it demands us to think with an infinite mind instead of a limited one. In other words, we should always ask ourselves as researchers “if we could sample everyone, would this statistic I just calculated be close to reliable?” One practical implication of this is having a sufficiently large sample size in order to increase the probability of being closer to the true mean. However, as the previous section discusses, these asymptotics are only as justified as the quality of the sample. We need, in other words, our sample to be as representative as possible of the broader population of interest. In the next lecture on correlation, aside from sampling, we will discuss the basics of statistical design in order to have valid results from statistical analysis.

8 Correlation and Association

As Gregory House once said, “The cave man who heard a rustle in the bushes checked out to see what it was lived longer than the guy who assumed it was just a breeze”. House’s point here is that the human ability for hypothetical reasoning and the ability to form associations in our minds was critical to our survival and development. In this case of course, we learned to check the bush since it could be a sabretooth or another human who wanted to eat us or steal our food, and we also learned to reason that checking things out, spear in hand, was more likely to keep us safe than rolling the dice by not checking. We will discuss the aspect of statistical reasoning that covers hypothetical reasoning later, but for now we cover simple correlation and measures of association. In statistical analysis, we typically begin by looking at bivariate correlations. We calculate a statistic called “Pearson’s r ”. The formula for Pearson’s r , the Pearson correlation coefficient for continuous variables, is:

$$r = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^N (x_i - \bar{x})(y_i - \bar{y})}{\sqrt{\sum_{i=1}^N (x_i - \bar{x})^2} \sqrt{\sum_{i=1}^N (y_i - \bar{y})^2}}.$$

Let’s parse these terms, shall we? The numerator is the formula for what we call the covariance between two random variables. It is the sum of the differences between the individual datapoints for each variable and its average, divided by the product of the standard deviations of each variable. More practically, r represents how variables tend to move together, given how much their values move internally (hence the standard deviation term). As a quick example, let’s compute the Pearson correlation coefficient r for the following data points $x = \{1, 2, 3, 4\}$ and for y we have $y = \{2, 4, 5, 7\}$.

Here is the computation...

First we calculate the means of x and y :

$$\bar{x} = \frac{1 + 2 + 3 + 4}{4} = 2.5 \quad \bar{y} = \frac{2 + 4 + 5 + 7}{4} = 4.5$$

Then compute the differences from the mean for each data point:

$$x_i - \bar{x} = \{-1.5, -0.5, 0.5, 1.5\} \quad y_i - \bar{y} = \{-2.5, -0.5, 0.5, 2.5\}.$$

Then calculate the sum of the products of these differences:

$$\begin{aligned} \sum (x_i - \bar{x})(y_i - \bar{y}) &= \\ (-1.5 \cdot -2.5) + (-0.5 \cdot -0.5) + (0.5 \cdot 0.5) + (1.5 \cdot 2.5) &= \\ 3.75 + 0.25 + 0.25 + 3.75 &= 8. \end{aligned}$$

Next, we compute the sum of the squared differences for x and y . For x we have

$$\begin{aligned}\sum (x_i - \bar{x})^2 &= \\ (-1.5)^2 + (-0.5)^2 + (0.5)^2 + (1.5)^2 &= \\ 2.25 + 0.25 + 0.25 + 2.25 &= 5.\end{aligned}$$

For y we have

$$\begin{aligned}\sum (y_i - \bar{y})^2 &= \\ (-2.5)^2 + (-0.5)^2 + 0.5^2 + 2.5^2 &= \\ 6.25 + 0.25 + 0.25 + 6.25 &= 13.\end{aligned}$$

Now, we plug these in:

$$r = \frac{\sum (x_i - \bar{x})(y_i - \bar{y})}{\sqrt{\sum (x_i - \bar{x})^2} \sqrt{\sum (y_i - \bar{y})^2}} = \frac{8}{\sqrt{5} \cdot \sqrt{13}} = \frac{8}{\sqrt{65}} = \frac{8}{8.062} \approx \boxed{0.993}.$$

Okay, so our correlation coefficient is 0.993. We'd say there's a strong, positive linear relationship between our variables here (whatever they happen to be). Similarly, if r were negative, we'd say there's a strong negative relation. Of course, if the coefficient were, say, 0.01 or -0.01, we'd say there's pretty much no relationship between the variables.

Here's how we'd visualize these.

We can think of r as the degree to which one variable moves with another variable. If the relationship were just $r = 1$ or $r = -1$, we'd say for every one increase in x , there's a guaranteed increase/decrease in y respectively because they move identically. For a simple example of a perfect linear relation, consider a dataset with the number of games an NBA team won in one column versus how many they lost in another column. For simplicity, let's consider the first ten games. If a team won 5, they also lost 5. If a team won 6, they must've lost 4. There's a perfect, inverse linear relationship between these; to win the first game necessarily means you've lost 0 games yet, and to lose the first means you've won none just yet.

By the way, we can do the exact same thing with categorical variables (e.g., race and promotions). We could consider a setting of two variables where we have gender as our predictor and an outcome for "promotion" (being promoted or not).

We can posit that gender may affect the likelihood of someone being promoted, perhaps men are more likely to be promoted than women. In this situation, we can graph the proportion of men who were promoted versus not. The plot above suggests that men were much more likely to be promoted than women are.

For those who care about the "statistical significance" of r ...

As for mean differences, we can also use the t-statistic for the correlation coefficient to determine statistical significance. So let's use the example above. First, here is the formula for the t-statistic:



$$t = \frac{r\sqrt{n-2}}{\sqrt{1-r^2}}$$

where r is the Pearson correlation coefficient and n is the number of data points. Given:

$$r \approx 0.993$$

$$n = 4,$$

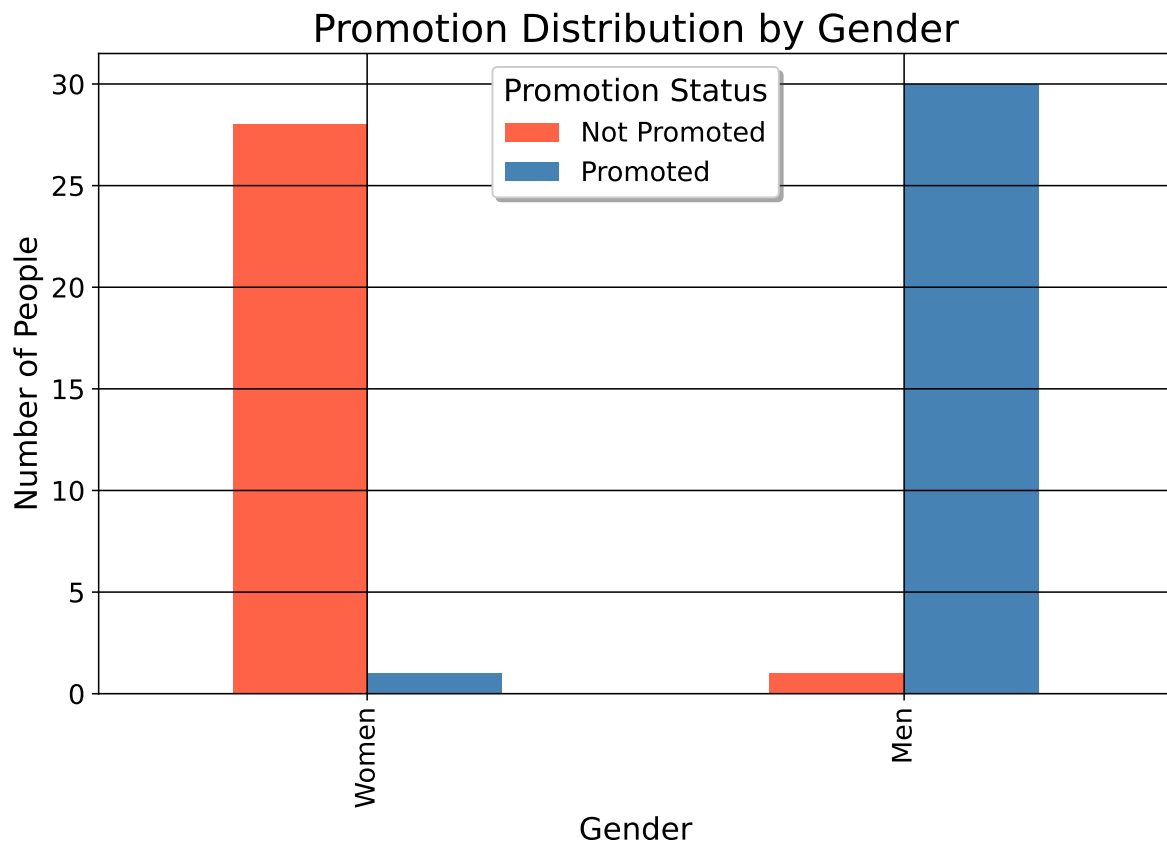
we can begin by plugging in our values. First, we compute the variance in the denominator by squaring our r :

$$r^2 = 0.993^2 = 0.986049$$

Then, we compute how much our one variable x does NOT explain the variance of the other variable:

$$1 - r^2 = 1 - 0.986049 = 0.013951$$

For our numerator, we compute:



$$\sqrt{n-2} = \sqrt{4-2} = \sqrt{2} \approx 1.414$$

Next, in the denominator, this simplifies to:

$$\sqrt{1-r^2} = \sqrt{0.013951} \approx 0.118$$

Finally, we compute:

$$t = \frac{0.993 \cdot 1.414}{0.118} \approx \frac{1.404102}{0.118} \approx 11.899$$

Thus, the t-statistic for the given Pearson's r is approximately 11.899. Since $11.9 \gg 1.96$, we'd say the linear association is statistically significant.

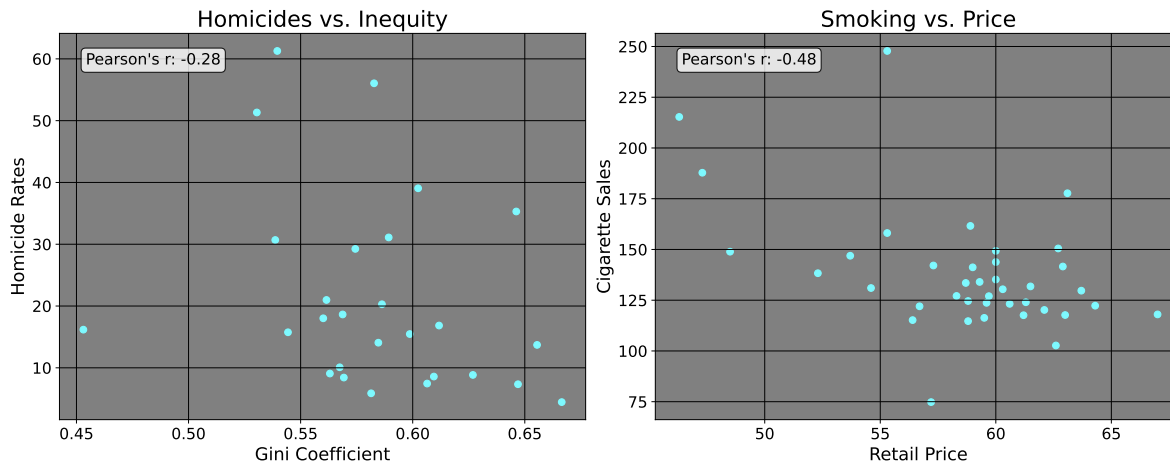
! Important

You will never do this by hand (at least I never have!), I include this section only to show it's possible.

8.1 A Prelude To Regression

Typically, when we discuss correlation, we use scatterplots to visualize the association between variables. A scatterplot is simply a chart which depicts the co-movement of variables. On the x-axis we plot our independent variables/predictors (or, the things we think explain a given outcome) and the y axis plots the variable we think is being affected by the one on the x-axis. Below, I plot in the left panel the homicide rate per 100,000 versus the state-specific Gini coefficient for 27 Brazilian states in the year 1990. The right panel plots the average retail price of cigarettes versus cigarette consumption per capita for 39 American states in the year 1980.

Well now, what do we see here? We see the plotted datapoints along with the Pearson's r . We can see a negative correlation coefficient reported, where a one unit increase in the Gini coefficient leads to a decrease in the homicide rate in Brazil for this year. We also observe a negative relationship between the retail price of cigarettes and the consumption of cigarettes, where an increase in price leads to a decrease in the amount of cigarettes consumed. This result especially should be pretty intuitive: all else equal, as the price of a good increases, the demand for said good generally decreases. However, what about the leftmost plot? The Gini coefficient is a measure for inequality, where 1 denotes one person has all the money and everyone else nada/nothing. A Gini coefficient of 0 means everyone has the same amount of money, and a measure of anything in between is some intermittent level of inequality. Well,



this result is puzzling in a bivariate lens: typically, we associate income inequality and poverty with an increase in things like homicide and other kinds of crime. This is where we begin to think atypically. While correlation is a useful measure sometimes, it alone is inadequate for serious policy analysis. Below, I explain why.

8.2 The First Exercise of the Statistical Mind

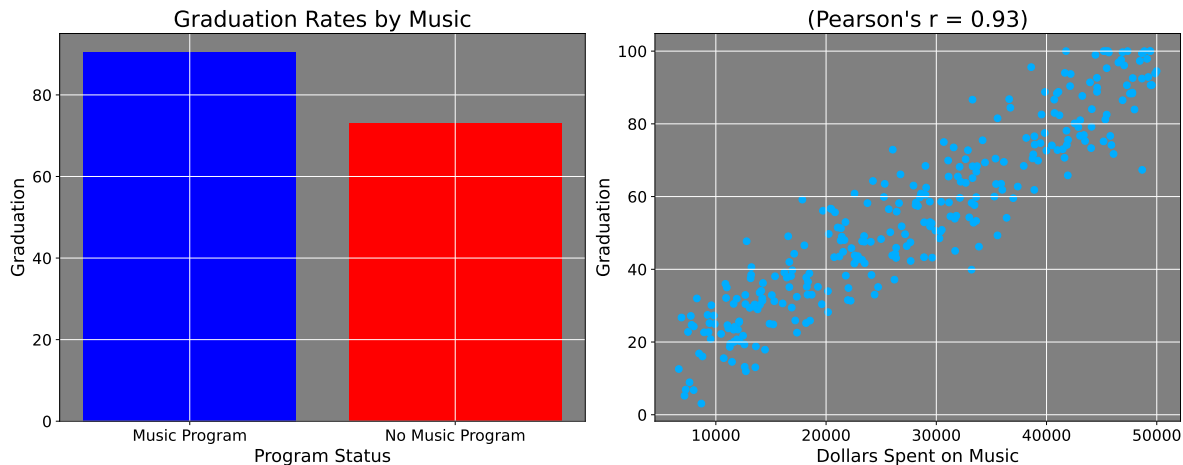
Earlier this morning, I was on Facebook and one of my friends posted a picture that cited [a story](#) of a public school music teacher named Annie Ray winning a Grammy. In the article, they say [caps theirs]

THE FACTS ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF MUSIC EDUCATION DON'T LIE... Schools that have music programs have significantly higher graduation rates than do those without music programs (90.2 percent as compared to 72.9 percent).

For visualization, let's do some graphing shall we? The plot on the left plots the rates from the quote, the right plot is simulated data.

This quote caused fire alarms to sound in my head. Why? Because the article (and [reporting](#) on music education more broadly) misleadingly discusses these statistics. This does NOT mean these statistics are wrong in terms of their computation. Presumably whoever did this used statistical software to get these numbers, and I trust that the numbers are accurate.

My criticism is about practical implication. The heavy suggestion from the block quotation is the music programs are *causing* this 17.3 percentage point difference in graduation rates. When we read things like “The facts don't lie”, there's this air of certainty that these statistics are being reported with.



And in fairness, this is not a *completely* crazy idea: music does indeed help people learn languages. It likely helped me learn Spanish and made me a better overall reader. It's also correlated with spatial skills. In fact, in another life, I was a music theorist who could do harmonic analysis of chord progressions and tell you what I thought the artist was trying to communicate. And as a matter of fact, music studies likely made me an even better econometrician, because one thing music analysis teaches you about is *context*. And in larger context, these statistics seem misleading.

The suggestion is that if more schools *just* had music programs, we'd see higher graduation rates by 17.3 percentage points, on average. And yes, to some degree, if a school now has a music program and did not have one before, it is true students now have the opportunity to learn music. They may even go on to study and succeed in music now that they have the opportunity to do so. But how could we estimate this? How many people would this even affect, exactly?

Most people do not want to be musicians. Learning music, like any other art form or professional skillset, is a non-trivial investment of time and money. Everyone doesn't have the means or honestly dedication to pursue it, especially in light of other potential desires or opportunities. Those who do decide to become musicians (not just in classically trained in school, but generally) may have personal qualities that differ from other students in ways that affect whether they graduate or other aggregate metrics of success. So if 20 more students in a school of 5000 and a graduating class of 300 reap the benefits of music, is this really enough to move the proverbial needle on the graduation rate for an entire school or county? Not likely.

More to the point, not every school has the *means* to have a music program, nevermind a well funded music program. According to statistics reported by Yamaha, 8% of all public schools in the United States don't have **any** arts programs at all (music, theatre, or dance).

In the U.S., schools are funded by property taxes in public schools and by extremely wealthy donors at private schools. This means that the wealthier public schools will be located in

wealthier districts which naturally has a bigger tax base. What do those districts have more of? Money! Status, class, opportunity. Instruments do not grow on trees, they cost money; not every school has 80,000 dollars for a Steinway piano. By the way (no, I did not look this up before writing it), the same study, according to Yamaha's reporting, said

The study also noted that a disproportionate number of these students without access to arts education are concentrated in major urban or very rural areas where the majority of students are Black, Hispanic or Native American, and at schools with the highest percentage of students eligible for free/reduced-price meals.

I have to emphasize again, I didn't suspect this because I looked it up before, I suspected it because this is what it means to think like a statistician. It means you have to think in a multivariate way, where more than one thing can affect something else. Here, this idea is pretty obvious: how do we know that these graduation rates are not explained in part (if not entirely) by baseline differences in socioeconomic status of communities (poverty, low employment rates, larger contextual factors), opportunities of individual families (say, personal connections individual families may have that others don't), as well as the effects those factors have on individual students? When we think of it like this, simply suggesting that music programs would be a great solution is not so convincing.

These aside, there may also be what we call "selection bias" here, where some students are able to *select* into/decide to go to a given school. For example, some schools have magnet programs. The one I was in was for the International Baccalaureate Program; other high schools have STEM magnet programs or music/arts programs where some schools literally recruit middle school students who want to pursue these things. And when they select for these qualities, it becomes hard to isolate the impact of a music program on a graduation rate, because they're already selecting for highly motivated students (who mostly but not exclusively are from wealthier districts or better-to-do families). These are the kinds of students who would perform well anyways, even if music wasn't there.

This again does not discount the real benefits of music education or the arts more generally! But when we read statistics, as with harmonic analysis of music chords, we also need to understand the context they exist within, and when we do this we begin to see that the relationship is not as clear cut as simple descriptive statistics might seem. As we see from the simulated plot, some schools have a graduation rate of almost nobody, which also happen to have low levels of music funding. And while I couldn't find specific examples of this when I looked up [data](#) on it, numbers this low [do happen](#) anecdotally. And when we see numbers like this, we must ask ourselves "How are these sets of schools different from these sets of schools?"

As we will see when we cover regression analysis, the world rarely works off of pretty, linear functions. Measures of simple association do not mean that something is causing another thing, the world is much too complex for that. As researchers and as human beings, we must constantly be skeptical of simplistic claims and investigate them when they seem too good to be true.

8.3 Tying This in With Asymptotic Theory

As we learned before, statistics is justified oftentimes on large scale asymptotics, where we consider an infinite population of units to sample from. In this framework, there's the idea of the existence of a population coefficient/average which exists only in theory and a sample (a subset of the population) which we use to calculate a mean which approximates that "true" value.

Suppose we have a spreadsheet at hand for the year 2018. The first column of said dataset/spreadsheet is the name of an American high school. The second column of the spreadsheet is some variable $m \in \{0, 1\}$. This, in English, means the column takes the value 0 or 1, where 0 means a school does not have a music program and 1 means they do have one. The third column of the dataset is the respective graduation rate of that school for 2018.

High School	Music	Graduation
Ben Franklin	1	92
Paul Revere	0	75
Alexander Hamilton	1	90
Thomas Jefferson	0	73
George Washington	1	88

Suppose now we're interested in the effect of music programs on graduation rates. Formally, we may denote our observed outcomes as

$$y_i = \begin{cases} y_i^0 & \forall i \in \mathcal{N}_0 \\ y_i^1 & \forall i \in \mathcal{N}_1 \end{cases}$$

where \mathcal{N}_1 is the set of schools that has a music program versus \mathcal{N}_0 , or the set of schools that do not, where y^1 is the graduation rate we observe when $m = 1$ and y^0 is the graduation rate we observe when $m = 0$.

If we simply believed the article I cited above, we'd say that there is some effect of music education on the graduation rate (or the average of the difference between the graduation rates of schools with and without music programs, $\frac{1}{N} \sum_{i=1}^N (y^1 - y^0)$). Following the article, we'd say that this difference around 17.3 percentage points (in the table above, it's around 16).

But this cannot be! As we've discussed, many more factors will affect not just whether a school has a music program and their graduation rates. So, if we were to simply compute $\frac{1}{N} \sum_{i=1}^N (y^1 - y^0)$, the number 16 (or 17) would be wrong, **even if we had access to every single high school and college on the planet**. Because of the baseline differences between these schools, our average mean difference (think a two-group t-test) would never converge to the population mean for the "effect" of music education. We would say that this is a *biased*

estimate because our estimate would be very far from the true effect, since the true effect is likely much smaller than 17.

8.4 Implications

The reason this matters for policy analysts is because when taken to its conclusion, mistaken correlation for causation or not thinking about things in a systemic, multivariate way could result in pumping more money into music programs in order to fix failing schools, a much wider and more sophisticated problem.

It leads to things like pumping more money into police departments to decrease crime rates, even though crime has been falling in general for decades in the U.S. and there's no real link between militant policing measures and crime reduction.

It also leads to things like mass like [many modern governments](#) doing things like making dating apps and sponsoring mass dating events (yes, really!) in order to increase birth and marriage rates.

The idea of course is that people aren't having kids or getting married *because* they're not meeting one another. And if more people met, the more kids they'd have. And to a degree this is true due to things like social media, so the underlying logic makes plenty of sense. But then, once we agree to this problem, we have to ask *why* are people not meeting one another and having kids or getting married? The real problem is *a lot* more systemic. Especially in South Korea, Japan, and [China](#), the reasons are mostly having to do with [labor issues](#), [changes in gender norms](#), and [broader social factors](#) which lead to people not wanting to have kids.

9 Summary

Correlation and causation is a very delicate topic in statistics. Whenever we're doing research, we must always be careful to structure our studies in such a way that our findings are not corrupted by other factors, even if our software tells us we've found a "statistically significant" correlation. I'm sure if we took the t-statistic of music programs and graduation (or funding of music programs, as my scatterplot does), we'd find a very high t-statistic for the correlation coefficient. Equally, we'd find a high t-statistic for countries reporting increases in [loneliness](#) and low fertility rates. But I don't care, and neither should you, since there are other factors which contribute to graduation aside from music, and a lot more factors driving fertility rates than simple loneliness or lack of opportunity to meet people. Thinking causally can be a challenging thing. After multiple years of torment, you will learn to think like this as if by muscle memory since it'll be so routine to you. We will cover this in more detail in our chapter on treatment effect estimation.

10 OLS Explained

10.1 Review of Lines and Functions

In middle school, we learn about [the basics of functions](#) in that when we plug in a number, we get another number in return. For $2x = y$ for example, if we plug in 2, we get 4. If we plug in 5, we get 10. If you're at the grocery store and grapes are 1 dollar and 50 cents per pound, we just weigh the grapes and multiply that number by 1.5. This could take the form of $(0, 0)$, $(1, 1.5)$, $(2, 3)$, and so on. In fact, we can represent these data points in a table like this

x	y
0	0
1	1.5
2	3

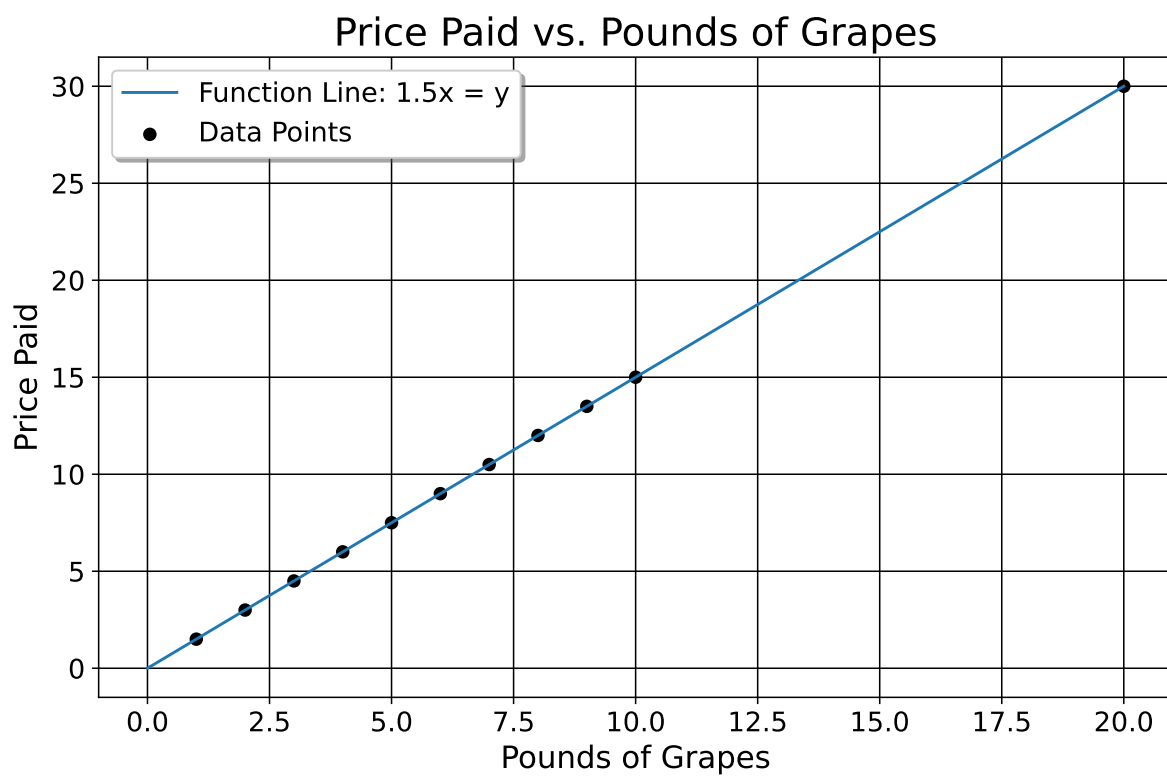
These points form a line, [the equation for which being](#) $y = mx + b$. We can also think of this line as a function, where we get some value of y given some values for the other variables. Here, y is how much we pay in total, m is the change in how much we pay for every 1 pound of grapes bought, and b is our value we pay if we get no grapes.

The way we find the m and b for a straight line is the “rise over run” method, in this case

$$m = \frac{y_2 - y_1}{x_2 - x_1} = \frac{3 - 0}{2 - 0} = \frac{3}{2} = 1.5$$

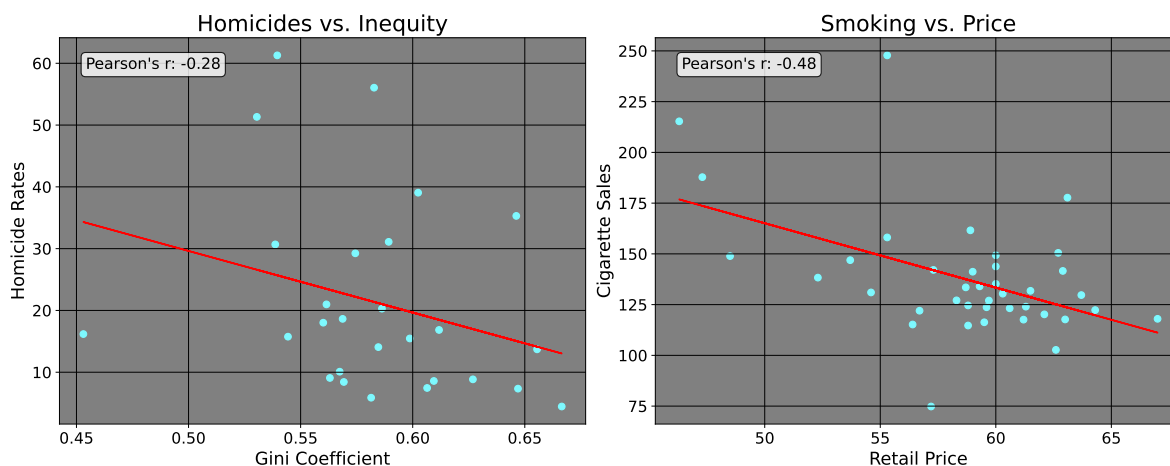
For this case, the function for the line is $y = 1.5x$. For here, $b = 0$ because in this case, how much we pay is a function of pounds of grapes only. Notice here how the line explains how much we pay perfectly (in other words, the line exactly matches the data points, as the line intersects perfectly with the dots on the plot). This means our *residuals*, or the difference between the prediction of the function and what we pay are 0.

For the above, y_i and x_i maps on to the i -th real data point for each repsective variable. So for example, y_2 for the above table is 1.5, as it represents the second row of the y variable, and x_1 is just 0. \hat{y}_i (which we call y-hat) is the i -th prediction point for the line/function. Here, the letter epsilon ($\hat{\epsilon}_i$) is just a variable for the (Euclidean) distance from the i -th predicted point



to the observed point. For example, if the observed value for our first data point is 10 but $\hat{y}_1 = 11$, then $\hat{\epsilon}_1 = 10 - 11 = -1$. Going forward, I will use the words “outcome (variable)” or “dependent variable” to refer to the thing that we are studying the change of, and “predictors”, “covariates”, or “independent variables” to refer to the variables we think affect our outcome.

With all this being said though, the example above is very simplistic. This is a case where all the necessary information is known (price and weight). The algebra is so simple we that we intuitively understand that this is how we calculate expenses. But.... what if the data we have at hand are not nice and neat in terms of a function?



Take the idea of predicting [crime rates in Brazilian states](#) in the year 1990 using the inequality level as a predictor, or [data on the consumption of cigarettes in American states](#) in the year 1980 using price as a predictor. Now for these examples, how do we calculate the rise over run? We would presume some *function* exists that generates the crime rate for that Brazilian state in that year, or that consumption level for that American state in that year. However, is quite obvious that no deterministic function exists here for either of these cases. Indeed, when I draw a line between these datapoints for both examples, we find that non-zero residuals still exists (in other words, the model *imperfectly* predicts homicide rates and cigarette consumption levels in both datasets.)

Before, we simply would throw our hands up, in a sense, and say that there's no solution. Algebra has failed us in that we cannot find a function which perfectly explains these data points. But, this is not a fool's errand. After all, this is what the real world is like, right? This is what it means to think in a multivariate way. Homicide rates and cigarette sales are *random variables* in the sense that they are produced by some latent function of probability that is determined by a wide variety of factors. The homicide rate or cigarette consumption rate in any state anywhere is not guaranteed. Sometimes in some states, homicides (or crime in general) is high, other times its low. Why? Well, some states are wealthier and some are poorer. Some states vary by racial compositions, or will differ by factors like age composition,

income inequality, alcohol use, and gun ownership. Thus... some cities have high homicide rates, others have low homicide rates.

We can reason accordingly for cigarette consumption of American states. American states will vary on cigarette consumption based on a variety of factors. Naturally, one factor would be the price of cigarettes, as one might expect, since people tend to not want to buy more of a good as the price increases (*well... usually.*) The number of young people in that state may mean that younger people are risk takers and may be more likely to smoke than adults (or alternatively, young people may perceive smoking as something for older adults and smoke less). Levels of alcohol taxation may matter as well, since alcohol may be a substitute for tobacco, so states with higher taxation may smoke more, on average. Also, plain and simple measures like culture (and other unobservable things) may play a role. After all this, Indeed, it would be very unreasonable to expect to find a singular function that perfectly explains the variation in either of these datasets. The real world is simply too complicated to be thought of like that.

So, what can we do? We can't find a function for the line that perfectly explains these data... But, how about we instead seek the best *possible* straight line? The line which minimizes the residuals between what we actually see and what we would predict, given our datapoints? As it turns out, we can.

10.2 Arrividerci, Algebra.

To do this though, we've now reached a point in the course where simple algebra is no longer our best guide. We now *must* use calculus, specifically the basics of [derivatives](#) and optimization.

! Important

Okay, so here I'm kind of lying. You actually **don't need** to say farewell to algebra completely to derive regression estimates, but [that process](#) "requires a ton of algebraic manipulation" (albeit with less calculus than I use here). In fact, for those brave of heart who know algebra well, you can *probably* just watch the series of videos I just linked to and skip to [this section](#) of the notes, but I *do not* recommend this. I find the calculus way via optimization a lot more intuitive.

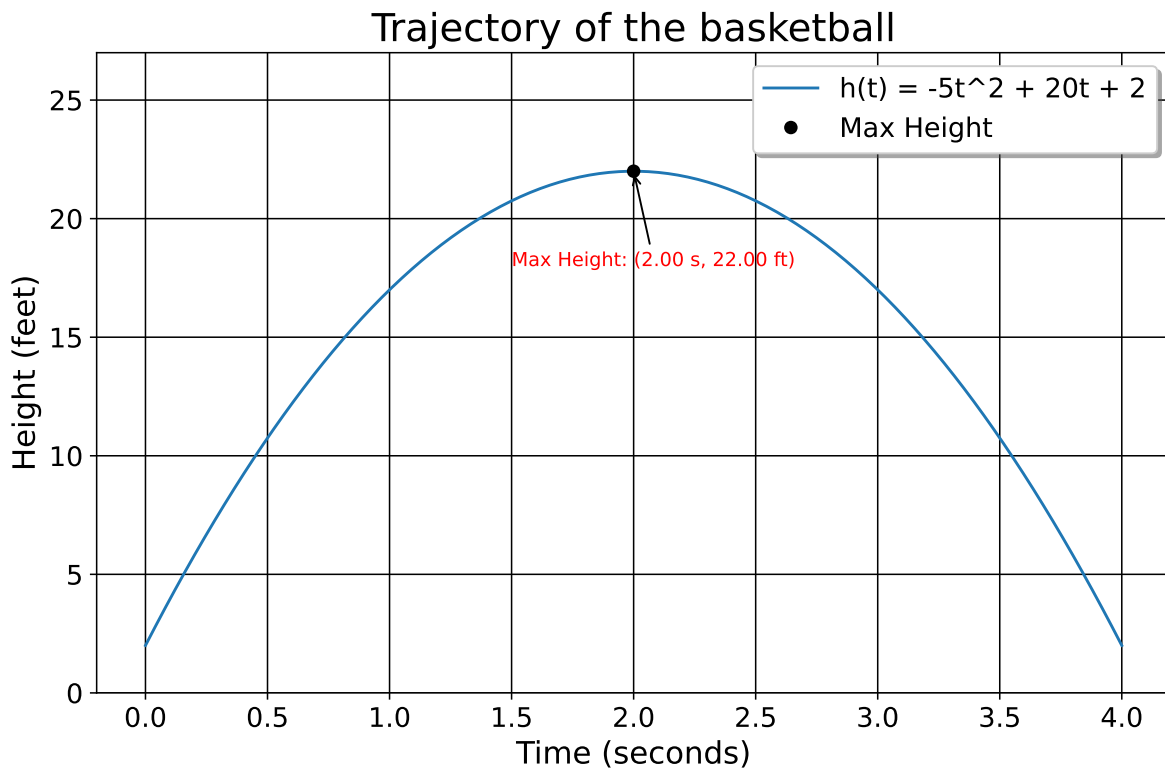
The derivative is the slope of a curve/line given a very small change in the value of the function. One very useful property about derivatives is that when we set the first derivative of a function to 0 and solve for the variable (I do an example below), we reach a maximum or minimum point on *the original function*, [usually](#). We will use derivatives to minimize the residuals for the best possible fitting line. To minimize our residuals, we use derivatives in the context of an optimization problem. Optimization problems take the form of

$$\min_{\theta \in \Theta} f(\theta) \text{ s.t. } g(\theta) = 0, h(\theta) \leq 0,$$

where there's some function $f(\theta)$ (called the *objective function*) that is minimized (or sometimes maximized) over a set of $g(\theta)$ equality constraints and $h(\theta)$ inequality constraints. In our case for the lines of best fit, we have no constraints in our objective function since we desire the best fitting line possible.

10.2.1 Derivatives

Before we do this though, a brief refresher on derivatives. Suppose we shoot a basketball while we stand on a 2 foot plateau, which produces a trajectory function of $h(t) = -5t^2 + 20t + 2$. Here $h(t)$ is a function representing the ball's height over time in seconds and the 2 represents the fact that we are standing 2 feet above flat ground. We can find the *maximum* height of the ball by taking the derivative of the original quadratic function and solving it for 0.



In this case, we use [the power rule](#) for derivatives. The power rule for derivatives is where we subtract the exponent value of a function by 1 and place the original value to be multiplied by the base number. For example, the derivative of $y = 2x^3$ is just $6x^2$, since $3 - 1 = 2$ and $2 \times 3 = 6$. Here, we can apply this exact principle to obtain the derivative for the function of the ball's trajectory:

$$\begin{aligned}
h(t) &= -5t^2 + 20t + 2 = \\
\frac{d}{dt}(-5t^2) + \frac{d}{dt}(20t) + \frac{d}{dt}(2) &= \\
t(5 \times 2) + 1(20) &= \overbrace{-10t + 20}^{\text{Derivative}}
\end{aligned}$$

We can then solve the derivative for 0.

$$\begin{aligned}
-10t + 20 &= 0 \Rightarrow \\
-10t &= -20 \Rightarrow \\
\frac{-10t}{10} &= \frac{-20}{-10} \Rightarrow \\
\boxed{t = 2}
\end{aligned}$$

We may now plug in the value of 2 to get the maximum height of the ball:

$$\begin{aligned}
-5t^2 + 20t + 2 &\Rightarrow \\
-5(2)^2 + 20(2) + 2 &\Rightarrow \\
-20 + 40 + 2 &= 22
\end{aligned}$$

So, the ball at its maximum is at 22 feet after 2 seconds (*strictly speaking*, if we wanted to be sure that this was a maximum instead of a minimum, we could take [the second derivative](#)). It is the highest point our ball reaches. So, we will use the idea of the derivative to minimize the sum of squared residuals, between our observed line and the line we predict. This is known as *ordinary least squares* regression (OLS), also called *linear regression*, or simply just “regression”. OLS is the main estimator you’ll use for this class, and it is the main foundation of econometric analysis for public policy research.

To introduce OLS, we can return to the equation of a line ($y = mx + b$) where m and b are variables. Unlike the above examples where m and b were once known variables, now they are unknown quantities we must solve for. Below, m and b will take on the values of β_1 and β_0 respectively. With OLS, we have multiple predictors (typically), each of which affect the output of the function differently.

! Important

A word on data types: The predictors for regression must be numeric, anturally. They can be a number (say, the employment rate) or they can be what we call a dummy variable. A dummy variable (also caled an *indicator* or *categorical* variable) is a variable that takes on the values 0 or 1. For example, a simple dummy is if the respondent for a survey for a survey is a man or woman. Suppose we are predicting the homicide rate across

multiple states. We can use dummies for each state, too, to capture unobserved variation in our outcome. For example, if we think that *something* makes Alabama, Alabama, we can include state/unit level dummies to capture things like culture or other very hard to observe variables that are stable at the unit level. There is also a notion of an *ordinal* variable, where the data at hand must obey a specific order. Suppose we ask people in a survey how religious they are on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1=Atheist and 10=Extremely Religious. Here, order matters, because 1 has a very different meaning from 10 in this instance.

In the multivariable case, we take the *partial derivative* with respect to each variable (that is, assuming that the other variables do not change). If this seems at all abstract to you, I will provide a detailed, clear derivation of the betas. Note that for all of the steps below, Stata, R, or Python does (and optimizes!) this process for you. I only provide this derivation so you have a source to refer to when you wish to know how and *why*, exactly, the machine returns the numbers that it returns to you.

Before we continue, let's fix ideas. Suppose we wish to attend a nightclub and we wish to express how much we pay for that evening as a function (our outcome variable). At this nightclub, our outcome is a function of two things. We pay *some* one-time cost of money to enter, and then we pay *some* amount of money per new drink we buy. I say "*some*" because unlike the real world where we would know the price and entry fees by reading the sign, in this case we wish to estimate these values with only two known variables: how many drinks we bought and how much we paid.

10.3 An Extended Example

! Important

This is where you may start skimming.

10.3.1 List the Data

Say that we have data that looks like $(0, 30), (1, 35), (2, 40)$, where x = number of drinks we buy $(0,1,2)$ and y =amount of money we spend that evening $(30,35,40)$. In spreadsheet format, this looks like:

x	y
0	30
1	35

x	y
2	40

If you want to, calculate the rise-over-run of these data points to derive m and see what the answer might be in the end. Below though, we proceed by deriving what m *must be*.

$$m = \frac{35 - 30}{1 - 0} = \dots$$

10.3.2 Define Our Econometric Model

We begin by defining our model. That is, we specify our outcome and the variables which affect our outcome (the values we’re solving for, entry price and drink cost). Our model of how much we pay given some entry fees and additional drink costs looks like:

$$y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 x$$

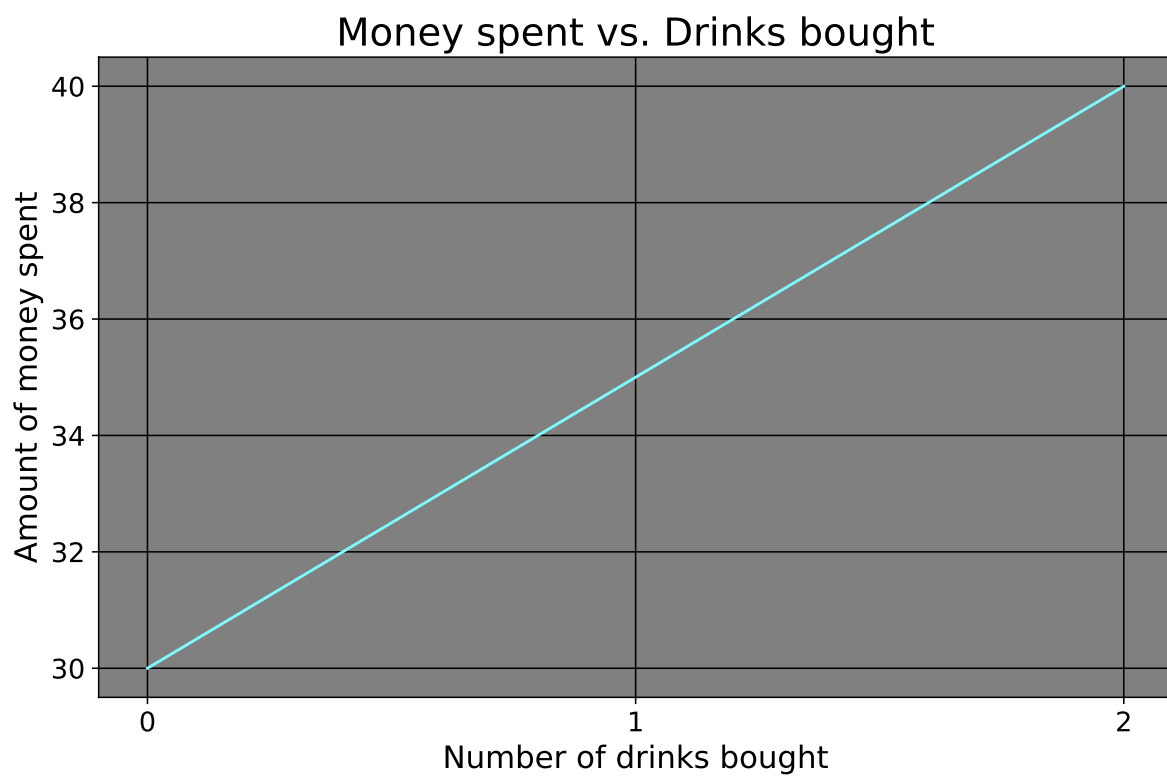
Here, y_i is the total amount of money we spend that evening in dollars given the i -th drink, $\hat{\beta}_0$ is how much we pay (also in dollars) to enter, $\hat{\beta}_1$ is how much we pay for the i -th drink, and x is the total number of drinks we get. Nothing **at all** about this is different, so far, from anything we’ve discussed above. I’ve simply substituted m and b with the Greek letter β (“beta”) into the already familiar $y = mx + b$. $y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 x$.

10.3.3 Write Out the Objective Function

Now that we have our model, next let’s think about what the objective function would be. We already know that we wish to minimize the residuals of the OLS line. So, we can represent the objective function for OLS as

$$S = \underset{\text{objective function}}{\operatorname{argmin}} \sum_{i=1}^n (y_i - \hat{y})^2.$$

I call the objective function “ S ” for “spending”, but we can call it any letter we’d like. $\hat{\epsilon}_i$, or our predicted residuals, are simply calculated like $y_i - \hat{y}$, or the difference between the observed values and our model’s prediction. By the way, this expression for the residuals should look familiar. Recall the formula for the variance of a variable $\operatorname{Var}(X) = \mathbb{E}[(X - \mathbb{E}[X])^2]$. Here, we are taking our real observations y and subtracting some expected value \hat{y} (y -hat) from it. Because we are minimizing the residuals, another way of thinking about OLS is that is the line that maximizes the explained variance given our independent variables. This is



why when we talk about regression/OLS, we talk about “explaining variation” given a set of variables, because we literally are maximizing the amount of variation by virtue of minimizing its prediction errors.

i Note

If this seems abstract, go above to the very first table and use software to calculate the Pearson’s r coefficient for the grape example. You’ll get a correlation coefficient of 1. Since the variance of r is r^2 , this also returns a value of 1. This means that the pounds of grapes bought *perfectly* explains the variation in how much we pay in total. By extension, when we draw a regression line for this function, we can clearly see how there’s *no distance* between the dotted data points and the function $y = 1.5x$. It minimizes the distance of the residuals and perfectly explains the variation of that dataset.

From the above, our model’s predictions for spending this evening are simply the summation of entry costs plus some amount of drinks bought at a given price, $\hat{y} = \hat{\beta}_0 + \hat{\beta}_1 x$. In fact, our objective function may be rewritten completely by decomposing \hat{y} as the model’s coefficients

$$S = \underset{\hat{\beta}_0, \hat{\beta}_1}{\operatorname{argmin}} \sum_{i=1}^n (y_i - \overbrace{(\hat{\beta}_0 + \hat{\beta}_1 x)}^{\text{Predictions}})^2.$$

The word “*argmin*” here means “argument of the minimum”. The symbols underneath S , $\hat{\beta}_0, \hat{\beta}_1$, are the coefficients/inputs we are solving for. We call the solutions $\hat{\beta}_0, \hat{\beta}_1$ *optimal* if they return the lowest possible values the function S can produce. What values can S produce? The sum of the squared residuals. The sigma symbol $\sum_{i=1}^n$ means we are adding up the i -th squared residual to the n -th data point/number of observations (in this case 3). This means that the line we compute will be as close as it can be to the observed data at every single data point.

One may ask *why* we are squaring the summed $\hat{\epsilon}_i$, instead of say [the absolute error](#). [First of all](#), minimizing the raw sum of the predicted residuals (that is, without squaring them) is a non-differentiable function. We could use this as an objective function, but [have fun doing that], as now we would [need to use numerical methods](#) to compute its solution. Using $\hat{\epsilon}_i^2$ means that we are dealing a quadratic function (making the solution easily differentiable). Also, suppose one observation has a residual of 40 and another observation has a residual of -40. Adding these residuals would cancel out to 0. The squaring also has the property of penalizing worse predictions. After all, all $\hat{\epsilon}_i$ should not be created equally. If the observed value is 20 but we predict 25, the residual is -5. Its squared residual is 25. But if the observed value is 40, and we predict 80, the “absolute” error is -40 and the squared error of is 1600. If we did not square them, we would be treating a residual of 5 as the same as a residual of 40, and this does not make sense.

10.3.4 Simplify the Objective Function

First, we can substitute the real values as well as our model for prediction into the objective function. We already know the values x -takes. You either buy no drinks, 1 drink, or 2. So with this information, we can now find the amount of money we pay up front ($\hat{\beta}_0$) and how much it costs for each drink ($\hat{\beta}_1$)

$$S = \underbrace{(30 - (\hat{\beta}_0 + \hat{\beta}_1 \cdot 0))^2}_{\text{Term 1}} + \underbrace{(35 - (\hat{\beta}_0 + \hat{\beta}_1 \cdot 1))^2}_{\text{Term 2}} + \underbrace{(40 - (\hat{\beta}_0 + \hat{\beta}_1 \cdot 2))^2}_{\text{Term 3}}$$

10.3.5 Take Partial Derivatives

Note

If you do not wish to follow this section, then at least skip to [this section](#) following my calculation of the partial derivatives.

To find the values of $\hat{\beta}_0$ and $\hat{\beta}_1$, we take the partial derivatives of S with respect to (w.r.t.) $\hat{\beta}_0$ and $\hat{\beta}_1$. Here is a short sketch of how we do this: For simplicity, I break this into two sections, one section per coefficient. In this case, the chain rule and power rules for differentiation are our friends here. To hear more about combining the power rule and chain rule, [see here](#). I define one set of inner and outer functions, beginning with the power rule for the outer function, and then taking the derivative for the inner function. First, we differentiate w.r.t. $\hat{\beta}_0$ (entry fees), then we do the same for $\hat{\beta}_1$ (drink fees).

1. Partial derivative w.r.t. $\hat{\beta}_0$:

First, we denote our inner functions.

$$\begin{aligned} f_1 &= 30 - (\hat{\beta}_0 + \hat{\beta}_1 \cdot 0) \\ f_2 &= 35 - (\hat{\beta}_0 + \hat{\beta}_1 \cdot 1) \\ f_3 &= 40 - (\hat{\beta}_0 + \hat{\beta}_1 \cdot 2) \end{aligned}$$

Here are our outer functions:

$$S = f_1^2 + f_2^2 + f_3^2.$$

Now, following the chain rule, we have:

$$\frac{\partial S}{\partial \hat{\beta}_0} = \frac{\partial S}{\partial f_1} \cdot \frac{\partial f_1}{\partial \hat{\beta}_0} + \frac{\partial S}{\partial f_2} \cdot \frac{\partial f_2}{\partial \hat{\beta}_0} + \frac{\partial S}{\partial f_3} \cdot \frac{\partial f_3}{\partial \hat{\beta}_0}.$$

The first step of the chain rule is using the power rule for the outer functions:

$$\begin{aligned}\frac{\partial S}{\partial f_1} &= 2f_1 \\ \frac{\partial S}{\partial f_2} &= 2f_2 \\ \frac{\partial S}{\partial f_3} &= 2f_3.\end{aligned}$$

All we've done here is used the power rule, taking the 2 from the exponent and putting it on the outside of each term's outer function. For the next step of the chain rule, we take the derivatives of each term's inner function w.r.t. $\hat{\beta}_0$:

$$\begin{aligned}\frac{\partial f_1}{\partial \hat{\beta}_0} &= -1 \\ \frac{\partial f_2}{\partial \hat{\beta}_0} &= -1 \\ \frac{\partial f_3}{\partial \hat{\beta}_0} &= -1.\end{aligned}$$

Since the coefficient for $-\hat{\beta}_0$ is negative 1, each inner function's derivative for $\hat{\beta}_0$ is just -1. Now, we substitute these inner derivatives back into the f_i functions:

$$\begin{aligned}\frac{\partial S}{\partial \hat{\beta}_0} &= 2f_1 \cdot (-1) + 2f_2 \cdot (-1) + 2f_3 \cdot (-1) \\ &= -2f_1 - 2f_2 - 2f_3 \\ &= -2(30 - (\hat{\beta}_0 + \hat{\beta}_1 \cdot 0)) \\ &\quad - 2(35 - (\hat{\beta}_0 + \hat{\beta}_1 \cdot 1)) \\ &\quad - 2(40 - (\hat{\beta}_0 + \hat{\beta}_1 \cdot 2))\end{aligned}$$

Now, we simplify this expression. Let's first expand each term by distributing the 2:

$$= -60 + 2\hat{\beta}_0 - 70 + 2\hat{\beta}_0 + 2\hat{\beta}_1 - 80 + 2\hat{\beta}_0 + 4\hat{\beta}_1.$$

Next I rearrange. I add parentheses for readability:

$$= (-60 - 70 - 80) + (2\hat{\beta}_0 + 2\hat{\beta}_0 + 2\hat{\beta}_0) + (2\hat{\beta}_1 + 4\hat{\beta}_1).$$

Finally, when we combine like terms, we end with

$$= \boxed{-210 + 6\hat{\beta}_0 + 6\hat{\beta}_1}.$$

2. Partial derivative w.r.t. $\hat{\beta}_1$:

Following from the above, here are our inner functions

$$\begin{aligned} f_1 &= 30 - (\hat{\beta}_0 + \hat{\beta}_1 \cdot 0) \\ f_2 &= 35 - (\hat{\beta}_0 + \hat{\beta}_1 \cdot 1) \\ f_3 &= 40 - (\hat{\beta}_0 + \hat{\beta}_1 \cdot 2). \end{aligned}$$

Then the outer functions:

$$S = f_1^2 + f_2^2 + f_3^2.$$

Just as before, here's the chain rule to get the partial derivative

$$\frac{\partial S}{\partial \hat{\beta}_1} = \frac{\partial S}{\partial f_1} \cdot \frac{\partial f_1}{\partial \hat{\beta}_1} + \frac{\partial S}{\partial f_2} \cdot \frac{\partial f_2}{\partial \hat{\beta}_1} + \frac{\partial S}{\partial f_3} \cdot \frac{\partial f_3}{\partial \hat{\beta}_1}.$$

First I apply the power rule to the the outer functions:

$$\begin{aligned} \frac{\partial S}{\partial f_1} &= 2f_1 \\ \frac{\partial S}{\partial f_2} &= 2f_2 \\ \frac{\partial S}{\partial f_3} &= 2f_3. \end{aligned}$$

Next, we'll do the inner functions:

$$\begin{aligned} \frac{\partial f_1}{\partial \hat{\beta}_1} &= 0 \\ \frac{\partial f_2}{\partial \hat{\beta}_1} &= -1 \\ \frac{\partial f_3}{\partial \hat{\beta}_1} &= -2 \end{aligned}$$

Note how $\hat{\beta}_1$ **isn't** in term 1 since it is multiplied by 0

$$\underbrace{(30 - (\hat{\beta}_0 + \hat{\beta}_1 \cdot 0))^2}_{\text{Term 1}},$$

its derivative must be 0. This means the first outer function goes away because $f_1 \times 0 = 0$. So, I omit this from my derivation. Next, we'll substitute these remaining two derivatives back into the expression for the outer function:

$$\begin{aligned}\frac{\partial S}{\partial \hat{\beta}_1} &= 2f_2 \cdot (-1) + 2f_3 \cdot (-2) \\ &= -2f_2 - 4f_3 \\ &= 2(35 - (\hat{\beta}_0 + \hat{\beta}_1 \cdot 1)) - 4(40 - (\hat{\beta}_0 + \hat{\beta}_1 \cdot 2)).\end{aligned}$$

Now, we combine like terms:

$$\frac{\partial S}{\partial \hat{\beta}_1} = -2(35 - \hat{\beta}_0 - \hat{\beta}_1) - 4(40 - \hat{\beta}_0 - 2\hat{\beta}_1).$$

To simplify this expression, first we'll expand each term by distributing the -2 and -4. Here is term 1:

$$-2(35 - \hat{\beta}_0 - \hat{\beta}_1) = -70 + 2\hat{\beta}_0 + 2\hat{\beta}_1.$$

Now we expand term 2:

$$-4(40 - \hat{\beta}_0 - 2\hat{\beta}_1) = -160 + 4\hat{\beta}_0 + 8\hat{\beta}_1.$$

Now, combine like terms:

$$= (-70 + 2\hat{\beta}_0 + 2\hat{\beta}_1) + (-160 + 4\hat{\beta}_0 + 8\hat{\beta}_1).$$

I move the constants outside of the parentheses. I add adding parentheses for readability:

$$= (-70 - 160) + (2\hat{\beta}_0 + 4\hat{\beta}_0) + (2\hat{\beta}_1 + 8\hat{\beta}_1).$$

After subtracting the constants and combining like terms once more, we're left with

$$\boxed{-230 + 6\hat{\beta}_0 + 10\hat{\beta}_1}.$$

10.3.6 Get the Betas

Now we've set up our partial derivatives, so we can now return to normal scalar algebra to get our betas (in practice this is done with *matrix* algebra). Either way, we must solve a system of equations. The reason we must solve them as a system of equations is because we need for BOTH values to be the ones which minimize the distance between the model's predictions and the observed data. Here are the equations we must solve for (note, we have two equations because we have two variables, but this can readily be extended to more variables):

$$\begin{aligned}\hat{\beta}_0 + \hat{\beta}_1 &= 35 \\ 6\hat{\beta}_0 + 10\hat{\beta}_1 &= 230.\end{aligned}$$

Here I use [a method called substitution](#) to solve the system, but there are many such ways we can solve this. I choose to solve the first parital first since it is by far the easiest.

10.3.6.1 Solve for $\hat{\beta}_0$:

The first step of substitution is to solve for one of our variables.

$$\begin{aligned}\hat{\beta}_0 + \hat{\beta}_1 &= 35 \Rightarrow \\ \hat{\beta}_0 + (\hat{\beta}_1 - \hat{\beta}_1) &= 35 - \hat{\beta}_1 \Rightarrow \\ \hat{\beta}_0 &= 35 - \hat{\beta}_1\end{aligned}$$

Before I continue, notice a few interesting things about this: we know, by construction of the problem, that the entry fee $\hat{\beta}_0$ is some positive number. We also know $\hat{\beta}_1$ has to be less than 35. Imagine a $\hat{\beta}_1 \geq 35$. This would mean $\hat{\beta}_0$ (our entry costs) would be kind of unusual. In this setting we at least get in for free or, even sillier, are *paid* to enter when $\hat{\beta}_1 > 35$, which does not make sense given the problem at hand. We also know that our entry fees $\hat{\beta}_0$ can't be 35, because then this means that $\hat{\beta}_1$ would have to be 0, or a scenario where drinks are free (or, being paid to drink if $\hat{\beta}_0 > 35$).

! Important

The reason I'm making such a fuss about this and carrying on with the example in this manner is because I want you to think of regression as a way of actually explaining the world, not just a set of arcane mathematical equations. This maps nicely on to the example we've developed.

Now, we continue to solve.

10.3.6.2 Substitute $\hat{\beta}_0$:

Since we know the expression for the constant (the entry fee), we can plug it into the partial for $\hat{\beta}_1$,

$$6\hat{\beta}_0 + 10\hat{\beta}_1 = 230.$$

$$6(35 - \hat{\beta}_1) + 10\hat{\beta}_1 = 230.$$

Next, we distribute the 6

$$210 - 6\hat{\beta}_1 + 10\hat{\beta}_1 = 230$$

and combine the terms $-6\hat{\beta}_1 + 10\hat{\beta}_1$ together

$$210 + 4\hat{\beta}_1 = 230.$$

Next, we subtract 210

$$4\hat{\beta}_1 = 20.$$

Finally, we divide by 4

$$\boxed{\hat{\beta}_1 = 5}.$$

Now, we know our value for $\hat{\beta}_1$!!! We know that for each drink we get, we pay 5 more dollars. Since we now know *this*, we substitute 5 into $\hat{\beta}_0 + \hat{\beta}_1 = 35$ where $\hat{\beta}_1$ is. Then, we have one equation to solve for, with our goal being to get the value of $\hat{\beta}_0$.

$$\hat{\beta}_0 + 5 = 35.$$

Now, we simply subtract 5 from the RHS

$$\boxed{\hat{\beta}_0 = 30}.$$

The entry fee is 30 dollars.

10.3.7 Our OLS Line of Best Fit

So, our line of best fit is $\hat{y} = 30 + 5x$. In social science, you'll hear people throw around terms like "when we controlled for *this*" or "*adjusted for*" another variable, or "when we *hold constant* these set of variables". This is what they mean by it. They, in the plainest language possible, mean that the dependent variable changes by some amount for every unitary increase in an independent variable, assuming the other values of the function don't change. So here, assuming the club has a flat entry fee that does not change on a person to person basis, the amount the function changes by for every new drink is an increase of 5 dollars. Or, *compared* to the scenario where you only wanted to get in the club (and not drink at all, where $x = 0$), you spend 5 more dollars per each new drink you get.

At the outset, one may ask why we did this at all. Why bother with the partial derivative approach and the messy system of equations? The reason is firstly pedagogical. OLS was never derived for me in quite this manner in undergrad, so I believe you should see it done with a simple, tractable, familiar example. Additionally, when we understand how the partial derivative allows us to look at the change of an overall function given the change of just *one* variable in that function, we can quickly see how we can attempt to isolate the causal impact of *multiple* variables. Strictly speaking, we did just that right here in this derivation! We considered the impact of BOTH entry fees and the number of drinks we bought too (after all, suppose entry was free, then we have no constant).



10.4 Inference For OLS

Now that we've conducted estimation, we can now conduct inference with these statistics we've generated. Indeed, this is the primary point of this at all, in a sense. We *want* to know if these estimates are different from some null hypothesis. To begin, recall the notation of $\hat{\epsilon}_i$ which denotes our residuals for the regression predictions. We can use this to generate the standard error/the uncertainty statistic associated with the respective regression estimate. We can begin with the residual sum of squares, calculated like $RSS = \sum(\hat{\epsilon}_i)^2$. Put another way, it is all the

variation *not* explained by our model. If $RSS = 0$, as was the case in the above example, then we have no need for inference since there's nothing our model does *not* explain. We then can estimate the variance of the error like $\hat{\sigma}^2 = \frac{RSS}{n-p}$, where n is our number of observations and p is our number of predictors (including the constant). We divide by $n - p$ because this takes into account our model's residual degrees of freedom, or our model's freedom to vary. Note as well that when $n = p$, the error variance is not defined, meaning for OLS to be valid we need less predictors than observations. For a more detailed explanation of degrees of freedom, see Pandey and Bright (2008).

With this, we can estimate the variance-covariance matrix as

$$\text{Var}(\hat{\beta}) = \hat{\sigma}^2(X^T X)^{-1}$$

This allows us to compute our standard error: $\text{SE}(\hat{\beta}_j) = \sqrt{\text{Var}(\hat{\beta})_{jj}}$.

! Important

Again, I will never ever ask you to calculate the standard error or t-statistic without the necessary coefficients to calculate it algebraically. The reason I'm showing you this is just so you have a very clear sense of where these numbers are coming from,

As we've discussed with normal descriptive statistics/classic hypothesis testing, we can also compute confidence intervals for these regression estimates. The formula for this should appear quite familiar

$$\beta_j \pm t_{\alpha/2, \text{df}} \cdot \text{SE}(\beta_j)$$

Here, β_j is the coefficient of our model, t is our test statistic (1.96 usually), α is our acceptance region (0.05 in most cases if we want a 95% confidence interval), SE is our standard error as we've computed it above and df is our degrees of freedom. Then, we can interpret our coefficients accordingly. Suppose a confidence interval for a coefficient 6.7 lies within 6.06 and 16.44. We interpret this as follows: given the dataset and input values (and assuming the OLS assumptions are valid, which we will detail below), we are 95% confident that the true value for that coefficient lies within the range of 6.06 and 16.44. In other words, there's a "width" of this confidence interval by about 10.

Just as we discussed in the preceding chapters, OLS's estimates (conditional on the assumptions being met, which we will cover after this) is only justified, asymptotically, based on the law of large numbers and CLT. In other words, as n tends to infinity, $\lim_{n \rightarrow \infty}$, our betas will converge to the true population value and the standard errors will shrink. Ergo, as these shrink, the confidence intervals will tighten, meaning our estimates will be more precise. A practical consequence of this is that as a very general rule, having more observations in your dataset makes your OLS estimates more precise and less biased.

10.4.1 Goodness of Fit Measures for OLS

We typically think of two goodness of fit statistics when using OLS, the R-squared statistics and the Root Mean Squared Error

$$R^2 = 1 - \frac{SS_{\text{res}}}{SS_{\text{tot}}} \quad \text{RMSE} = \sqrt{\frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n (y_i - \hat{y}_i)^2}.$$

Here, for R-squared, we have two terms: first, $SS_{\text{res}} = \sum_{i=1}^n (y_i - \hat{y}_i)^2$ is the sum of squared residuals. SS_{res} quantifies the amount of variance unexplained by the independent variables in the model, and SS_{tot} is just the total amount of variance of y . Think of R-squared as a ratio/percentage of how well the model explains our outcomes. An R-squared of 1 reflects the simple example we derived above, where the model perfectly explains the variation of our outcomes. R-squared usually scales with the amount of predictors in the model (that is, as we add more variables, the R-squared will increase). However, I think the best way to think about R-squared is a measure of how well our model does, compared to the average of our outcomes. In the nightclub example, if we just took the average of our outcomes, we'd guess for that evening, you'd spend 28.3 dollars. But, in this case, the model significantly outperforms this since it explains the variation perfectly. Note, that it is possible to have a negative R-squared. It is very rare, and it basically means that your model does a worse job than the simple average of the outcomes. I've seen this in my work, but I've only encountered it in the wild maybe twice.

The Root Mean Squared error, or RMSE, is exactly as it sounds: it is the square root of our average of our SS_{res} . For the tobacco dataset for example that I include above, our sum of residuals squared is 26015.2655. When we divide this by our residual degrees of freedom, or $38 - 1$, we get 703.115283. When we take the square root, we get 26.516. In English, this simply means that when we use price to explain consumption for the year 1980, the model is off, on average, by about 27 packs. Considering that the average cigarette consumption in 1980 was 137.6308, being off by 26 packs isn't bad, and it suggests, as one would expect, that we've explained our dataset fairly well. As RMSE approaches 0, we explain our variation better, with an RMSE of 0 being perfection. Note that other goodness of fit metrics do exist; however, these are the most common ones you'll encounter.

10.5 Assumptions of OLS

Keep in mind, despite all the detail we've discussed so far, do not lose sight of the larger picture: OLS is simply a mathematical estimation method. Its *validity* for explaining the external world (aside from having quality data) relies on a few assumptions (collectively called the Gauss-Markov assumptions) being defensible. I say defensible instead of true because practically they are never true. After all, this is statistics: almost all of statistics is true. All

statistical research (pretty much, outside of simulations) is at least partly wrong because we live in a probabilistic world where we don't have all the answers. In other words, the assumptions are only as valid as we can defend for them. Below, I detail them.

10.5.1 Assumption 1: Linear in Parameters

The very first assumption is that the parameters for our model are linear. The classic regression model for OLS is

$$y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 x_{i1} + \cdots + \beta_K x_{iK} + \epsilon_i.$$

We call this a linear model. Why? How do we know if it's a linear relationship, and what might violations of this look like? Let's say we're buying weed. Say the price per quarter ounce is 80 dollars. The impact of β_1 is the same everywhere in the function, $y = 80x$. But step back and ask ourselves, from the seller's perspective, if this makes sense: does it make sense for weed to cost the same for every weight amount? No! Why not? Well, for one, let's say you're selling a full gram or pound of weed. That's *so much* weed that weed(wo)men/people will charge much much more for lone individuals who wish to buy this much. So while it may be 80 for a quarter ounce, it'll now be, say, 900 per pound. In fact, we could express this as a piecewise function

$$\beta_j = \begin{cases} 80 & \text{if } x < 1 \\ 900 & \text{if } x > 1. \end{cases}$$

Why might this be done? Firstly, that's so much more product than the average person could smoke or use. So, anyone interested in this would need to pay premium prices for such an outlandish amount. Also, it allows the dealer to get the pound of weed off their hands—relative to ounces, pounds of weed are much more likely to be noticed by police and therefore punished by the law harsher. So, the quicker they sell, the quicker they may re-up. So, for the normal crowd of people who do not buy pounds, they pay one price. For those who are abnormal in how much they demand (say, the distributor for the connect for cocaine markets), they pay another price altogether. We see price discrimination in legal markets too, such as Sams Club. We can see that a regression model here IS NOT linear in parameters, since the slope of the line will change at different values of the function.

People often confuse this assumption with non-linear values of our independent variables as they relate to our outcome. They conflate nonlinear regression

$$y_i = \beta_0^2 + \beta_1^2 x_{i1} + \cdots + \beta_K^2 x_{iK} + \epsilon_i$$

with

$$y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 x_{i1}^2 + \cdots + \beta_K x_{iK}^2 + \epsilon_i,$$

or an OLS model with non-linear relations between the inputs and the outcomes. Let me explain why this is wrong, because as it turns out, we can indeed model curvature. I've already given an example of when we'd have a nonlinear relationship in terms of our betas. Now I discuss non-linearities in terms of our predictors. Let's say we wish to model how much someone can dead lift given some input of age. Let's say the true population parameter for the OLS model is 6 (we ignore the constant for exposition purposes)

$$y_i = 6x_i$$

What is our value for 0? 0, since you're not yet born. For age 10? 60. For age 30? 180. For age 80? 480. I think we can already see why this relationship being modeled would be silly: it presumes that the older you get, the stronger one is. Which, generally speaking, is true... but we also know that at some point, as with all things, glory fades. Someone that was once strong and in shape will not (in general) always be that way because the body declines with the passage of time. How do we take this into account for our regression model, though?

$$y_i = \beta_1(x_{i1} \times x_i) + x_i \equiv y_i = \beta_1 x_i^2$$

We simply square the original value of age, keeping its linear form in the regression model. That way, when age 4 is input in the model, the number our regression model reads in the computer is 16. When age 10 is put into the model, it reads 100. Of course, as one would expect, there's likely some critical point for this function, where people begin to be able to lift less given some values of age.

Another example of being able to account for non-linearities from economics is the idea of modeling how much produce one may produce given a set of labor inputs. Suppose we're cooking cocaine. With just two people, you can get work done, but it won't be a lot. With three people, you can do more, and more with each additional person. However, there's an idea in economics called diminishing marginal returns for the factors of production (in this case labor). You may be able to cook a lot with 10 or 20 people, but when you have 40 or 50 people, at some point we end up producing less because there's too many proverbial cooks in the kitchen. So, if we wished to model output of cocaine as a function of labor, we'd likely wish to square the "number of workers" part of our model since it does not make sense to expect production to increase perfectly linearly with every new human working with you. So you see, the linear in parameters assumption deals with our betas impact on our predictor variables, not the input values of our predictor variables.

10.5.2 Assumption 2: Random Sample

We next presume that we've collected a random sample of our population. The name *random* sample is something of an antiquated, romantic name to denote the idea that the sample we've collected is representative of the population we wish to map on to. Suppose we wish to investigate the relationship between introducing all virtual menus at a restaurant (the kind you

scan on your phone) to see if it increases how much money they make for [*random marketing reasons*]. We take all the restaurants in Buckhead and Sandy Springs in Atlanta as a sample, comparing the ones that did this intervention to the ones that didn't do the intervention. We get a coefficient of 10,000, suggesting that this intervention increased money made, on average, by 10,000 dollars compared to the places that didn't do this. The issue with this idea is that our sample is not a random sample of the population. Sandy Springs and Buckhead, in particular, are among the wealthiest areas in Atlanta. We can't generalize the effect of this intervention to the population (restaurants in Atlanta, say) because our units of interest are decidedly *not* representative of Atlanta's entire culinary scene. They have very specific customers that make a generalization a bad idea.

Another example can come from sports. Say we posit a relationship between height and skill at basketball. We take a sample of NBA players, run a few regressions for relevant metrics and have our software spit out coefficients at us. Can we generalize to the population? No!! The NBA is one of the most selective sports leagues on the planet. The NBA selected for height and skill, among other things. The worst player on the NBA bench is like a god from Olympus compared to the average human, physically and in terms of skill. They are not representative of even a human 2 standard deviations above the mean. So, we cannot use NBA players to generalize to the population, *unless* of course we are concerned only with NBA players. The same would apply to the first example: if we care only about the high-income restaurants in the city, then that's great, but assuming we wish to generalize more broadly, we will need more data from other, more diverse units that have more information encoded in their outcome about the sample.

10.5.3 Assumption 3: No Perfect Collinearity

The simple way to think about this one is we cannot include redundant variables in our regressions. Suppose we wish to predict the ticket sales of NBA teams. In our regression, we include the number of games won as well as the number of games lost. Well, these are mirror images of each other. The number of games you won is a direct function of the total games minus the number you lost, and the number you lost is a direct and perfect function of the total minus the number you won.

By extension, suppose we wish to compare women to men (say we wish to test that men earn more/less than women on average). We take data on 500 respondents who we've sampled randomly across a company. We have one column that denotes the respondent as male and the other as female. We cannot include both male and female columns in our models, these are perfect linear functions of one another. A female is necessarily not coded as male, and male is necessarily not coded as female. Practically, this means we must choose when we use a categorical variable in our models. Say our regression includes age and gender as a predictor. If category 1 of gender is female and category 0 is male, then if the beta for "gender" is -30, we would interpret the beta for gender as "holding constant age/compared to men of the same age group, female respondents earn about 30 dollars less than men." By extension, the coefficient

for male (if we decided to include this group as the group of interest) would just be 30, with a similar interpretation in the other direction.

10.5.4 Assumption 4: Strict Exogeneity: $\mathbb{E}[\epsilon_i | x_{i1}, \dots, x_{iK}] = 0$

Next we presume strict exogeneity. Formally, this means the average of our errors, given the set of covariates we've controlled for, is 0. It means our predictor variables may not be correlated with the error term. In other words, we cannot omit important variables from our model. For example, say we wish to see how the number of firefighters sent to a call affects the amount of damage from that fire. We conclude that there's a positive relationship between number of firefighters sent and damage, so we elect to send less people to future calls, using a simple bivariate model as justification. Is this a good idea? No!!!! People will die like that. Presumably, the firefighters are not pouring gasoline on the fire, so perhaps we've *omitted* things from our model that might influence both how many people we send as well as fire damage. What else should we control for? Maybe, building size, building type, neighborhood income status, temperature, and other relevant predictors to ensure that we are not blaming the outcomes on a spurious relationship. Indeed, on some level we would expect for the size of the fire to be correlated with the number of people sent to fight it. Thus, when we do not control for other factors, our coefficients, no matter how precise, suffer from *omitted variable bias*. Strict exogeneity is pretty much never met in real life, but it basically posits that there's no other critical variable missing from our regression model that may explain our outcome. This is also why it matters to critically think about the variables one will use in their regression model *before* they run regressions.

11 Summary

This undoubtably is the most weighty chapter, both in terms of mathematics and in terms of practical understanding. Regression is one of the building blocks for policy analysis, in addition to solid theoretical background and contextual knowledge of the policy being studied. The reason I chose to cover this first, in the first few weeks of the class instead of waiting until the end, is because I believe that the only way to truly understand regression is by use in applied examples. This is what you'll explore more of in your papers.

12 Causal Inference

An intro to causality...

Part II

Applied Research Methods

Pandey, Shanta, and Charlotte Lyn Bright. 2008. "What Are Degrees of Freedom?" *Social Work Research* 32 (2): 119–28. <https://doi.org/10.1093/swr/32.2.119>.