

## 8. Statistical power and effect size

LPO.8800: Statistical Methods in Education Research

Sean P. Corcoran

### Last time

- Statistical hypothesis testing: tests about  $\mu$  and  $\pi$
- Null vs. alternative hypotheses; one-tailed vs. two-tailed tests
- Test statistics and  $p$ -values
- Significance levels ( $\alpha$ )
- Using a  $(1 - \alpha)\%$  confidence interval to test a hypothesis with an  $\alpha$  significance level
- Using `mean` or `ttest` in Stata for hypothesis testing with data
- Stata's `ttesti` and `prtesti` calculators

## Type I and Type II errors

A hypothesis test can result in one of two types of incorrect decisions:

- **Type I error:** rejecting  $H_0$  when it is actually true
- **Type II error:** not rejecting  $H_0$  when it is false

## Type I and Type II errors

	Reject $H_0$	Do Not Reject $H_0$
$H_0$ is true	Incorrect decision— <b>Type I error</b> ( $\Pr = \alpha$ )	Correct decision ( $\Pr = 1 - \alpha$ )
$H_0$ is false	Correct decision ( $\Pr = 1 - \beta$ )	Incorrect decision— <b>Type II error</b> ( $\Pr = \beta$ )

## Type I and Type II errors

Example: criminal court

- $H_0$ : not guilty
- **Type I error**: rejecting  $H_0$  and convicting an innocent man
- **Type II error**: not rejecting  $H_0$  and letting a guilty man go free
- Guilt “beyond a reasonable doubt”—implies a very low p-value is required, a very high confidence level (low significance level  $\alpha$ ).

## Type I and Type II errors

Example: PSA (prostate specific antigen) screening for prostate cancer

- $H_0$ : no prostate cancer
- **Type I error**: false positive—finding elevated levels of PSA and inferring a cancer growth when it does not exist
- **Type II error**: false negative—failing to detect an actual cancerous growth when it does exist

There are costly consequences for both types of errors:

- If a Type II error is made, growth exists and is untreated
- If a Type I error is made, detect tumor and perform unnecessary surgery

## Probability of a Type II error

The probability of committing a Type II error is a bit more difficult to calculate than the probability of committing a Type I error (which is set by the researcher as  $\alpha$ ). This is because this probability depends on how far away the plausible alternative to  $\mu_0$  is.

- All else equal, we will be *more* likely to make a Type II error if the true  $\mu$  is close—but not equal to— $\mu_0$ .
- All else equal, we will be *less* likely to make a Type II error if the true  $\mu$  is far away from  $\mu_0$ .

## Probability of a Type II error

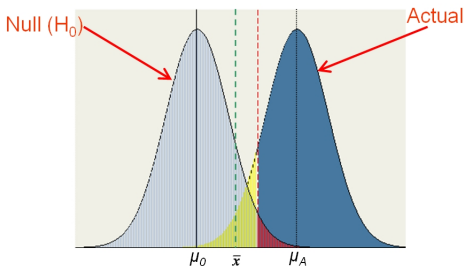


Figure: Distribution of  $\bar{x}$  under  $H_0$  and a specific alternative  $H_A$

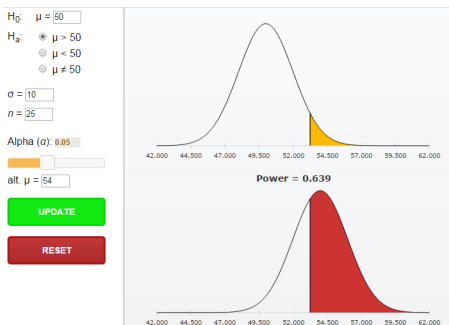
## Power of the test

The probability of *correctly* rejecting  $H_0$  when  $H_0$  is false ( $1 - \beta$ ) is called the **power of the test**. The power of the test represents our ability to detect a difference between the null hypothesis and a particular alternative hypothesis. This is the dark blue region in the previous slide.

Note: the following figures were taken from an online applet linked on the class website:

[http://digitalfirst.bfwpub.com/stats\\_applet/stats\\_applet\\_9\\_power.html](http://digitalfirst.bfwpub.com/stats_applet/stats_applet_9_power.html)

## Power - 1



One-sided hypothesis test:  $\mu_0 = 50$ ,  $\sigma = 10$ ,  $n = 25$ ,  $\alpha = 0.05$ . Find statistical power ( $1 - \beta$ ) when  $\mu$  is actually 54.

## Power - 1

If you were doing this manually, you would need to determine the value of  $\bar{x}$  beyond which  $H_0$  will be rejected (i.e., the yellow region above), find its  $z$  (or  $t$ ) score in the *alternative* sampling distribution, and determine the probability of obtaining that score or something greater if  $H_a$  were true.

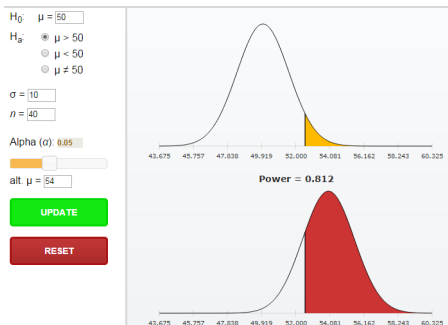
The  $\bar{x}$  beyond which  $H_0$  is rejected is:  $50 + 1.645 * (10/\sqrt{25}) = 53.29$

The  $z$ -value in the *alternative* is:  $(53.29 - 54)/(10/\sqrt{25}) = -0.355$

The probability of obtaining a  $z > -0.355$  is **0.639**. `1-normal(-0.355)`

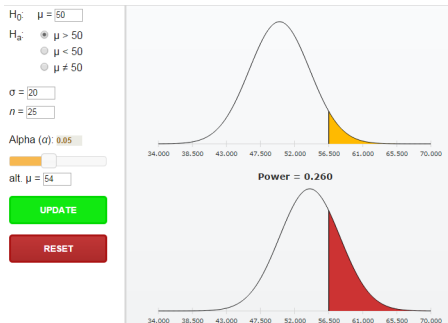
I have assumed normality for simplicity here. If  $\sigma$  were unknown this would affect the  $t$  value used above (it would be 1.677 rather than 1.645), and a  $t$  distribution would be used in the probability calculation.

## Power - 2



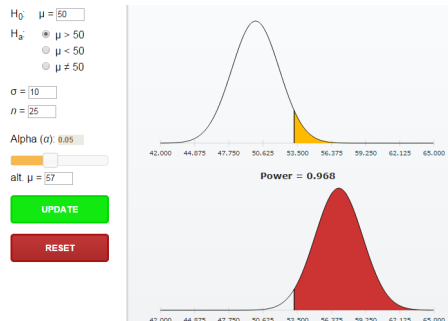
Consider what happens when  $n$  increases to 40.

## Power - 3



Consider what happens when  $\sigma$  increases to 20 (keep  $n = 25$ ).

## Power - 4



Consider what happens when the alternative is further away (e.g.  $\mu = 57$ ).

## Power of the test

Things that affect the power of the test (our ability to discern the null hypothesis from an alternative):

- **The effect size of interest:** how far the alternative is away from the null. All else equal, the closer the alternative to the null, the lower the power.
- **Significance level**, which determines when we reject. All else equal, a higher  $\alpha$  the greater the power of the test.
- **The standard error of the sample mean** ( $\sigma/\sqrt{n}$ ). All else equal, the smaller the standard error, the greater the power of the test. Because increasing *sample size* decreases the standard error, a larger  $n$  (holding  $\sigma$  constant) will increase the power of the test.
- **1- vs. 2-sided test.** 1-tailed tests have more power to detect an effect in one direction vs. a 2-tailed test with the same  $\alpha$ .

## Power of the test

Tools for calculating power for tests of  $\mu$ :

- Power applet: [http://digitalfirst.bfwpub.com/stats\\_applet/stats\\_applet\\_9\\_power.html](http://digitalfirst.bfwpub.com/stats_applet/stats_applet_9_power.html)
- **Stata power command:** Statistics  $\rightarrow$  Power and sample size  $\rightarrow$  Means  $\rightarrow$  One-sample  $\rightarrow$  Test comparing one mean to a reference value. Select Compute: Power. Can calculate:
  - ▶ Power ( $1 - \beta$ )
  - ▶ Sample size requirements
- Stata can accept ranges of values (e.g., sample sizes, alternative hypotheses) and plot the results



## Power calculation in Stata - 1

Using “Power - 1” example above.  $\mu_0 = 50, \sigma = 10, n = 25, \alpha = 0.05$ .  
Find statistical power when  $\mu$  is actually 54.

```
. power onemean 50 54, n(25) sd(10) knownsd onesided
```

Estimated power for a one-sample mean test

z test

H<sub>0</sub>:  $\mu = \mu_0$  versus H<sub>a</sub>:  $\mu > \mu_0$

Study parameters:

alpha = 0.0500

N = 25

delta = 0.4000

m0 = 50.0000

ma = 54.0000

sd = 10.0000

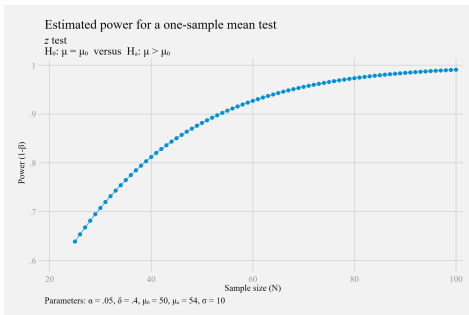
Estimated power:

power = 0.6388

Note: *delta* ( $\delta$ ) is the *effect size*:  $(54-50)/10$ . More on this later.

## Power calculation in Stata - 1

Using “Power - 1” example.  $\mu_0 = 50, \mu_a = 54, \sigma = 10, \alpha = 0.05$ . Find power for sample sizes ranging from  $n = 25$  to  $n = 100$ .



## Power calculation in Stata - 1

What if the test were *two-sided* and  $\mu_a = 54$ ? We will reject the null less often than if the test were one-sided (lower power).

```
. power onemean 50 54, n(25) sd(10) knownsd

Estimated power for a one-sample mean test
z test
Ho: m = m0   versus   Ha: m != m0

Study parameters:

      alpha =    0.0500
        N =      25
      delta =    0.4000
        m0 =   50.0000
         ma =   54.0000
         sd =   10.0000

Estimated power:

      power =    0.5160
```

## Power calculation in Stata - 2

Your research group has developed an intervention designed to improve reading comprehension in 3rd grade. The typical (mean) gain on the 3rd grade reading test is 10 points, with a standard deviation of 6. Your intervention intends to improve on this. You randomly select  $n$  students to receive the intervention and calculate their mean gains ( $\bar{x}$ ).

A standard significance test would be set up as:

$$H_0 : \mu = 10$$

$$H_1 : \mu > 10$$

The test statistic is:  $t = (\bar{x} - 10)/(6/\sqrt{n})$ , and you will reject if the probability of obtaining a  $t$  at least that large is  $< 0.05$ .

## Power calculation in Stata - 2

In some circumstances, your test will fail to reject  $H_0$  even when it is false (a Type II error). If your intervention has a positive effect, you'd like your test to reject  $H_0$ .

Your team believes the intervention will increase gains by 2 (from 10 to 12)—an effect size of  $2/6 = 0.33$ . What is the probability of a Type II error (and power) associated with various sample sizes (25-60)?

```
. power onemean 10 12, n(25(5)60) sd(6) knownsd onesided table(power beta N) graph
```

Estimated power for a one-sample mean test

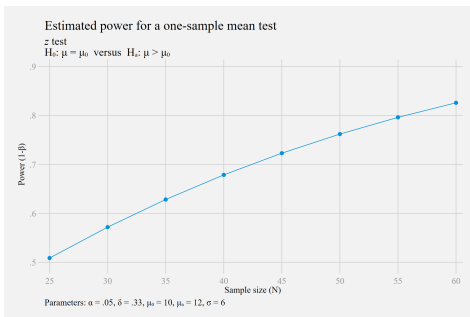
z test

Ho:  $\mu = \mu_0$  versus Ha:  $\mu > \mu_0$

power	beta	N
.5087	.4913	25
.5718	.4282	30
.6282	.3718	35
.6784	.3216	40
.7228	.2772	45
.7618	.2382	50
.7959	.2041	55
.8257	.1743	60

## Power calculation in Stata - 2

Graphically:



## Power - interpretation

Sticking with the previous example and  $n = 45$ :

- In 95% of random samples, this test will not reject  $H_0$  if it is true (i.e., the mean gain in the study sample is 10, no different than the general population).
- In 5% of random samples, this test *will* reject  $H_0$  when it is true—a Type I error. This is by design, since  $\alpha = 0.05$ .
- Suppose  $\mu = 12$  in the study population—the study had a +2 point effect. If  $n = 45$ , we fail to reject  $H_0$  in 27.7% of random samples—a Type II error. We don't detect the effect in these cases.
- In 72.3% of random samples, we properly reject  $H_0$  (power, or  $1 - \beta$ )

What is a desirable power? A generally accepted value is **80%**.

## Power - uses

The most common reasons for power analysis are:

- Determining the **minimum required sample size**. How large of a sample  $n$  do I need in order to detect a given effect size ( $\mu_a - \mu_0$ )  $(1 - \beta)\%$  of the time?
- Determining the **minimum detectable effect size** (MDES). Given a sample size  $n$ , what is the smallest effect I will detect  $(1 - \beta)\%$  of the time?

## Practical significance

A *statistically significant* effect or difference is not necessarily a *practically important* one. In fact, with a large enough  $n$ , one can find statistically significant differences between the observed and hypothesized mean, even when the absolute difference between the two is quite small. For example:

- In our test of mean body temperature  $H_0 : \mu = 98.6$ , a large sample size could result in  $\bar{x} = 98.59$  leading to the rejection of  $H_0$ . In other words, the difference could be statistically significant.
- But whether this difference is **practically significant** is a different matter, and depends on the context.

Practical significance is sometimes referred to as a “meaningfully large” effect, an “educationally significant” effect, “economically significant effect,” or “clinically significant effect,” depending on the context.

## Effect size

An **effect size** is a measure of the degree to which the null hypothesis is false, in some meaningful unit (rather than in probabilistic terms). One measure of effect size is the number of *standard deviations* in the original distribution the observed sample mean is from the hypothesized one. This measure is sometimes called **Cohen's d**:

$$d = \frac{\bar{x} - \mu_0}{s}$$

Note we are using  $s$  from the original scale of  $x$  (not standard errors, which always decrease as  $n$  gets larger).

Note: in the Stata power output this is called *delta* ( $\delta$ ).

## Effect size

For example, suppose we were able to reject  $H_0 : \mu = 98.6$  with  $\bar{x} = 98.59$  (and assume  $s = 0.60$ ). The effect size is:

$$d = \frac{\bar{x} - \mu_0}{s} = \frac{98.59 - 98.6}{0.60} = -0.017$$

The standard deviation of body temperature in the sample is 0.60. Our observed sample mean temperature is only 0.017 standard deviations below our hypothesized mean. Even if we can reject  $H_0$ , this small difference in temperature may not be practically significant.

## Practical vs. statistical significance

	A	B	C	D
Sample size	10,000	10,000	9	1,000
Overall mean test score	200	200	200	200
Standard deviation	25	25	100	25
Girls' mean test score	175	199	175	199
Boys' mean test score	225	201	225	201
$\Delta$ = Difference (Boys - Girls)	<b>50</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>2</b>
Standard error (se) of difference in means	0.5	0.5	66.6	1.58
t-statistic for difference in mean				
$H_0$ : no difference ( $\Delta/se$ )	100	4	0.75	1.26
p-value	$p < 0.0001$	$p < 0.001$	$p > 0.40$	$p > 0.20$
Statistically significant?	Yes	Yes	No	No
Confidence interval	$50 \pm 1.96 * 0.5$ (49.02, 50.98)	$2 \pm 1.96 * 0.5$ (1.02, 2.98)	$50 \pm 2.31 * 66.6$ (-103.8, 203.85)	$2 \pm 1.96 * 1.58$ (-1.10, 5.10)
Effect size $\delta$ ( $\Delta/SD$ )	2	0.08	0.5	0.08
Practically significant?	Yes	No	Yes (if true)	No

Source: Remler & Van Ryzin ch. 8. Note standard error for difference in means is  $2 * (SD/\sqrt{n})$  where  $n/2$  is the number in each group (covered later). Assumes the standard deviation is the same for boys and girls, and an equal number of boys and girls.

## Practical vs. statistical significance

In column D, the results are neither practically nor statistically significant. But they still provide valuable information. Note the 95% confidence interval of  $(-1.1, 5.1)$ . If we don't consider the *bounds* of this interval to be meaningful differences, then we can rule out practically meaningful effects.

When the confidence interval includes zero and rules out meaningful effects, it is sometimes called a **precise zero**.

## How to report results: advice

Most papers emphasize two characteristics: statistical significance and practical significance. (Bad ones focus only on statistical significance).

- Statistical significance tells us that the point estimate is statistically different from  $H_0$  (often, zero).
- Practical significance assesses whether the point estimate is meaningful in size, given the context.

Some limitations to this approach:

- 1 Zero and the point estimate itself are not the only values of interest. Sometimes zero is not an interesting null hypothesis.
- 2 No information is provided about the *strength* of the evidence against the null.

## How to report results: advice

Empirical papers in leading economics journals rarely discuss confidence intervals or the size of standard errors (Romer, 2020).

TABLE 1—INFORMATION REPORTED IN THE TEXT OF  
EMPIRICAL PAPERS IN THREE LEADING JOURNALS IN 2019

<i>Discussed prominently</i>	
Confidence intervals	14% (3)
Standard errors but not confidence intervals	10% (3)
<i>Mentioned in passing</i>	
Confidence intervals	6% (2)
Standard errors but not confidence intervals	7% (2)
Neither confidence intervals nor standard errors discussed	64% (5)

*Notes:* Standard errors are in parentheses. See text for details.

The upper end of a 2 SE confidence interval for papers that discuss confidence intervals is 20%. ;)

## How to report results: advice

Romer (2020): “the tone is often that once it is known that estimates are statistically different from zero, the only aspect of the results that matters is the point estimates—almost as though when an estimate is significantly different from zero, it can be treated as exact.”

Romer recommends reporting and discussing confidence intervals.

“Knowing significance is not enough to know what values of the parameter other than zero the data provide strong evidence against, and what values they provide little reason to object to.”



## Example

Consider two papers estimating the rate of return to an additional year of education (i.e., the % increase in annual earnings). Both papers estimate  $\bar{x} = 9.0$ .

- Paper 1 has a standard error of 3.9
- Paper 2 has a standard error of 1.8

Both papers would claim statistical and practical significance. (For most people, the benefit to additional education would outweigh the costs).

- Paper 1 has a 95% CI of (1.4, 16.6)
- Paper 2 has a 95% CI of (5.5, 12.5)

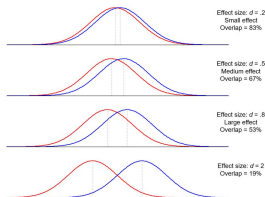
Paper 1 cannot rule out effects that may be considered practically small.  
Need to see the standard error and/or confidence interval!

## Benchmarking effect sizes

How do we know if an effect size is practically meaningful? Cohen (1969) proposed the following guidelines for interpreting  $d$ :

- 0.2 = small effect
- 0.5 = medium effect
- 0.8 = large effect

### Understanding Effect Sizes



## Benchmarking effect sizes

These benchmarks do not work well in all contexts, however, and the evidence suggests they are much too large for educational interventions (Kraft, 2020; Hill et al., 2008).

In public health: Rutledge & Loh (2004) on effects of health behaviors (smoking, obesity, etc.)

## Benchmarking effect sizes

A better approach to interpreting effect size is to look to empirical benchmarks—that is, looking to *existing evidence* to tell us whether an effect is meaningful or not. Approaches in Hill et al. (2008):

- Normative expectations for growth in student achievement: “typical yearly growth”
- Policy-relevant gaps in student achievement by demographic group or school performance (e.g., commonly-observed gaps by income, race, gender)
- Effect sizes from past research for similar interventions and target populations.

# Benchmarking effect sizes: typical student growth

Annual growth tends to be greater for younger kids, and varies by subject.

**Table 1**  
*Average Annual Gain in Effect Size From Nationally Normed Tests*

	Reading tests		Math tests	
	Mean	Margin of error	Mean	Margin of error
Grade transition				
Grade K-1	1.52	$\pm 0.21$	1.14	$\pm 0.49$
Grade 1-2	0.97	$\pm 0.10$	1.03	$\pm 0.14$
Grade 2-3	0.60	$\pm 0.10$	0.89	$\pm 0.16$
Grade 3-4	0.36	$\pm 0.12$	0.52	$\pm 0.14$
Grade 4-5	0.40	$\pm 0.06$	0.56	$\pm 0.11$
Grade 5-6	0.32	$\pm 0.11$	0.41	$\pm 0.08$
Grade 6-7	0.23	$\pm 0.11$	0.30	$\pm 0.06$
Grade 7-8	0.26	$\pm 0.03$	0.32	$\pm 0.05$
Grade 8-9	0.24	$\pm 0.10$	0.22	$\pm 0.10$
Grade 9-10	0.19	$\pm 0.08$	0.25	$\pm 0.07$
Grade 10-11	0.19	$\pm 0.17$	0.14	$\pm 0.16$
Grade 11-12	0.06	$\pm 0.11$	0.01	$\pm 0.14$

Sources. Annual gain for reading is calculated from seven nationally normed tests: California Achievement Test (CAT)-5th edition, Stanford Achievement Test (SAT)-9th edition, TerraNova-Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS), Metropolitan Achievement Test (MATs), TerraNova-CAT, SAT10, and Gates-MacGinitie. Annual gain for math is calculated from six nationally normed tests: CATs, SAT9, TerraNova-CTBS, MATs, TerraNova-CAT, and SAT10. For further details, contact the authors (Bloom et al. 2006a, 2006b, 2007a, 2007b, in press; Lipsey et al., 2007).

Source: Hill et al. (2008)

## Benchmarking effect sizes: typical achievement gaps

2002 and 2000 NAEP achievement gaps in reading and math:

**Table 2**  
*Demographic Performance Gap in Mean NAEP Scores, by Grade (in Effect Size)*

Subject and grade	Black-White	Hispanic-White	Eligible-ineligible for free/reduced-price lunch	Male-Female
Reading				
Grade 4	-0.83	-0.77	-0.74	-0.18
Grade 8	-0.80	-0.76	-0.66	-0.23
Grade 12	-0.67	-0.53	-0.45	-0.44
Math				
Grade 4	-0.99	-0.85	-0.85	0.08
Grade 8	-1.04	-0.82	-0.80	0.04
Grade 12	-0.94	-0.68	-0.72	0.09

Sources. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2002 Reading Assessment, and 2000 Mathematics Assessment (Bloom et al., 2007a, 2007b, in press; Lipsey et al., 2007).

Source: Hill et al. (2008)

## Benchmarking effect sizes

Based on a review of 747 randomized controlled trials in education, Kraft (2020) proposes the following benchmarks:

- $< 0.05$  = small effect size
- $0.05 - 0.2$  = medium effect size
- $> 0.20$  = large effect size

In determining practical significance in your context, ask “how large is the effect relative to other studies with broadly comparable features?”

## Benchmarking effect sizes

Typical effect sizes vary by test subject (math or reading), scope of test, and sample size.

Table 1  
Empirical Distributions of Effect Sizes From Randomized Control Trials of Education Interventions With Standardized Achievement Outcomes

	Subject			Sample Size					Scope of Test		DoE Studies
	Overall	Math	Reading	≤100	101–250	251–500	501–2,000	>2,000	Broad	Narrow	
Mean	0.16	0.11	0.17	0.30	0.16	0.16	0.10	0.05	0.14	0.25	0.03
Standard deviation	0.28	0.22	0.29	0.41	0.29	0.22	0.15	0.11	0.24	0.44	0.16
Mean (weighted)	0.04	0.03	0.05	0.29	0.15	0.16	0.10	0.02	0.04	0.08	0.02
P1	–0.38	–0.34	–0.38	–0.56	–0.42	–0.29	–0.23	–0.22	–0.38	–0.78	–0.38
P10	–0.08	–0.08	–0.08	–0.10	–0.14	–0.07	–0.05	–0.06	–0.08	–0.12	–0.14
P20	–0.01	–0.03	–0.01	0.02	–0.04	0.00	–0.01	–0.03	–0.03	0.00	–0.07
P30	0.02	0.01	0.03	0.10	0.02	0.06	0.03	0.00	0.02	0.05	–0.04
P40	0.06	0.04	0.08	0.16	0.07	0.10	0.06	0.01	0.06	0.11	–0.01
P50	0.10	0.07	0.12	0.24	0.12	0.15	0.09	0.03	0.10	0.17	0.03
P60	0.15	0.11	0.17	0.32	0.17	0.18	0.12	0.05	0.14	0.22	0.05
P70	0.21	0.16	0.23	0.43	0.25	0.22	0.15	0.08	0.20	0.34	0.09
P80	0.30	0.22	0.33	0.55	0.35	0.29	0.19	0.11	0.29	0.47	0.14
P90	0.47	0.37	0.50	0.77	0.49	0.40	0.27	0.17	0.43	0.70	0.23
P99	1.08	0.91	1.14	1.58	0.93	0.91	0.61	0.48	0.93	2.12	0.50
k (number of effect sizes)	1,942	588	1,260	408	452	328	395	327	1,352	243	139
n (number of studies)	747	314	495	202	169	173	181	124	527	91	49

Note: A majority of the standardized achievement outcomes (96%) are based on math and English language art test scores, with the remaining based on science, social studies, or general achievement. Weights are based on sample size for weighted mean estimates. For details about data sources, see Appendix A, available on the journal website. DoE = U.S. Department of Education.

## Benchmarking effect sizes

How should we think about effect sizes? (advice from Kraft, 2020)

- Effect sizes can be *descriptive* (correlational) or *causal*. Descriptive “effect sizes” are often much larger than causal ones.
- Effects on short-run outcomes are often larger than effects on long-run outcomes.
- Effects on specialized and researcher-designed instruments are often larger than those on broader instruments.
- Effect sizes are smaller when more measurement error is expected.

## Benchmarking effect sizes

How should we think about effect sizes? (advice from Kraft, cont.)

- Studies with more targeted samples tend to have bigger effects than those with more inclusive samples.
- Effect sizes for an intervention tend to be larger when there is a greater treatment-control contrast.
- Treatment effects are larger if they are based on actual treatment, rather than a treatment *offer*.
- Cost matters: effects from lower-cost interventions are arguably more impressive than effects from higher-cost interventions.
- Effects of interventions are generally smaller when they are taken to scale.

## More on $p$ -values

- Publication bias /  $p$ -Screening
- $p$ -Hacking
- Over-comparing and under-reporting

### The lucky coin flipper

Suppose a subject flips a coin 15 times and gets heads 13 of those times. What is the probability this result (or something more extreme) could have occurred by chance?

$$\underbrace{0.5^{13}(1-0.5)^2 \frac{15!}{13!(15-13)!}}_{0.0032} + \underbrace{0.5^{14}(1-0.5)^1 \frac{15!}{14!(15-14)!}}_{0.00046} + \underbrace{0.5^{15}(1-0.5)^0 \frac{15!}{15!(15-15)!}}_{0.00003} = 0.003693$$

or in Stata: `bitesti 15 13 0.5` yields  $Pr(k \geq 13) = 0.003693$ . Very unlikely! If this were a hypothesis test, we would reject  $H_0 : \pi = 0.5$ .

## The lucky coin flipper

Now if 100 subjects *independently* flip a coin 15 times, what is the probability that at least 1 of them gets heads 13 or more times?

The probability that none of them meets this benchmark is:

$$(1 - 0.003693)^{100} = 0.691$$

Thus the probability that at least one of them gets 13 or more heads is:

$$1 - 0.691 = 0.309$$

That is, an almost 1 in 3 chance that someone will perform this well!  
(Note: `bitesti 100 1 0.003693` confirms  $Pr(k \geq 1) = 0.309$ )

“If someone flips a coin and gets the same result 9 or 10 times, it is not remarkable in itself, but it will seem remarkable to the person flipping the coin.” (From Bueno de Mequita & Fowler, 2022, ch. 7)

## The Journal of Lucky Coin Flippers

In the real world, we are more likely to hear about the significant cases. “Neither the public nor the scientific community gets to see all of the hypothesis tests that were (or could have been) conducted.”

- **Publication bias:** journals tend to favor statistically significant ( $p < \alpha$ ), surprising, and noteworthy results.
- **“File drawer effect”:** studies lacking significant findings are more likely to be shelved by the authors.

These behaviors might collectively be called **p-Screening**.

## The Journal of Lucky Coin Flippers

In the coin flip example, if the 13 heads out of 15 outcome was unusual, it would be unlikely to re-occur in subsequent trials:

- `bitesti 100 1 0.003693` yields  $Pr(k \geq 1) = 0.309$
- `bitesti 100 2 0.003693` yields  $Pr(k \geq 1) = 0.053$
- `bitesti 100 3 0.003693` yields  $Pr(k \geq 1) = 0.006$
- Etc.

The probability that 2 or 3 “studies” obtain the same unusual result—if  $H_0$  is true—is very low. We need to see both the statistically significant and insignificant findings!

## Publication bias can inflate perceptions of effect size

- Suppose there are many well-designed, unbiased studies of an effect. The only difference between them is sampling variation.
- Suppose journals only publish *statistically significant* findings (those significantly different from zero).
- To pass the publication test, the estimate must be large relative to its standard error. We only observe estimates that are sufficiently large.
- Ex: suppose the true effect = 1 and the studies all have a confidence interval width of  $\pm 2$ . The studies will only reject  $H_0$  when the estimated effect is 2 or greater.

Over time, the published estimates will tend to *overstate* the true effect.



## $p$ -Hacking

The above example assumed researchers were acting in good faith, and that results only varied due to sampling variation. In practice, analysts may play around with their data or tests until  $p$  is below some threshold:

- Lots of subgroup analyses
- Specification searches
- Lots of different outcomes

This is called  **$p$ -Hacking**, and clearly exacerbates the problem.

## Diagnosing $p$ -Hacking

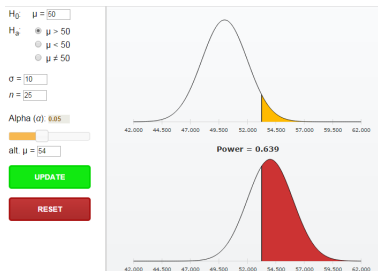
If  $H_0$  is true and there is no real “effect” (e.g., difference from zero),  $p$ -values should be equally likely across studies:

- In 1% of samples, one will obtain  $p < 0.01$
- In 2% of samples, one will obtain  $p < 0.02$
- In 5% of samples, one will obtain  $p < 0.05$
- ...and so on

In other words,  $p$ -values have a *uniform distribution* under  $H_0$ .

## Diagnosing $p$ -Hacking

If  $H_a$  is true and there is an “effect” (e.g., difference from zero),  $p$ -values are more likely to be small than large. Example 1 from earlier:



## Diagnosing $p$ -Hacking

If researchers are  $p$ -Hacking, they may tinker with their analysis until  $p < 0.05$ . This suggests bunching of  $p$ -values just under 0.05.

# Diagnosing $p$ -Hacking

Patterns of  $p$ -values in three cases (assume journals only publish when  $p < 0.05$ ):

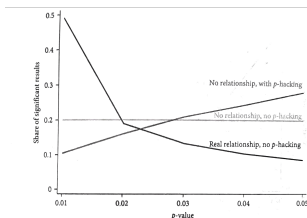


Figure 7.2.  $p$ -hacking distorts the distribution of  $p$ -values in a literature.

Source: Bueno de Mesquita & Fowler (2022).

## Potential solutions

- 1 Reduce significance threshold (e.g.,  $p < 0.005$ ). There are pros and cons to this.
- 2 Adjust  $p$ -values for multiple testing (like coin flip example earlier). Complicated for non-independent multiple tests.
- 3 Don't obsess over statistical significance. Use  $p$ -values, confidence intervals, practical significance.
- 4 **Pre-registration**: pre-commit to tests before seeing the data.
- 5 **Replication**: independent replications of the same study.
- 6 Focus on important and plausible hypotheses. Is the answer to the question interesting, regardless of what it turns out to be? (Example of the "power pose").

# Pre-registration

Examples:

- Open Science Framework: <https://osf.io/>
- Registry of Efficacy and Effectiveness Studies:  
<https://sreereg.icpsr.umich.edu/sreereg/>
- AEA RCT Registry: <https://www.socialscienceregistry.org/>