Lecture 11: Sept 13

Last time

- Types of Random Variables

Today

- Discrete Random Variables
- Continuous Random Variables

Discrete Random Variables

Suppose a random variable X takes only a finite or countable number of values. Let the sample space of X be $S = \{x_1, x_2, \dots\}$. Then the cdf can be expressed as:

$$F(x) = \sum_{x_i \leqslant x} \Pr(X = x_i).$$

Definition The *probability mass function* (pmf) of a discrete random variable X is given by

$$f_X(x) = \Pr(X = x) \text{ for all } x.$$

If the sample space of X is $X = \{x_1, x_2, \dots\}$, then

$$f(x_i) = \Pr(X = x_i) = \Pr(x_{i-1} < X \leqslant x_i) = F(x_i) - F(x_{i-1}).$$

Example (Geometric probabilities) Suppose we do an experiment that consists of tossing a coin until a head appears. Let p = probability of a head on any given toss, and define a random variable X = number of tosses required to get a head. Then for any $x = 1, 2, \dots,$

$$\Pr(X = x) = (1 - p)^{x-1} p,$$

since we must get $x - 1$ tails followed by a head for the event to occur and all trials are independent. What is the pmf of the above Geometric distribution? What is the cdf?

solution:

Definition The *domain* of a random variable X is the set of all values of x for which $f(x) > 0$. This is also called *range*, *sample space* or *support*.

Properties of the pmf:

1. $f(x) > 0$ for at most a countable number of values x. For all other values x, $f(x) = 0$.

2. Let $\{x_1, x_2, \dots\}$ denote the domain of X. Then

$$\sum_{i=1}^{\infty} f(x_i) = 1.$$

An obvious consequence is that $f(x) \leqslant 1$ over the domain.

Example What is the pmf of a deterministic random variable (a constant)?
solution:

Example In many applications, a formula can be used to represent the pmf of a random variable. Suppose X can take values $1, 2, \dots$ with pmf

$$f(x) = \begin{cases} \frac{1}{x(x+1)} & \text{for } x = 1, 2, \dots \\ 0 & \text{otherwise.} \end{cases}$$

How would we determine if this is an allowable pmf?
solution:

Continuous Random Variables

Definition A random variable X is *continuous* if $F_X(x)$ is a continuous function of x.

Definition A random variable X is *absolutely continuous* if $F_X(x)$ is an absolutely continuous function of x.

Definition A function $F(x)$ is *absolutely continuous* if it can be written

$$F(x) = \int_{-\infty}^{x} f(x)dx.$$

Absolute continuity is stronger than continuity but weaker than differentiability. An example of an absolutely continuous function is one that is:

- continuous everywhere
- differentiable everywhere, except possibly for a countable number of points.

Definition The *probability density function* or pdf, $f_X(x)$, of a continuous random variable X is the function that satisfies

$$F_X(x) = \int_{-\infty}^{x} f_X(t)dt \quad \text{for all } x.$$

Notation: We write $X \sim F_X(x)$ for the expression "X has a distribution given by $F_X(x)$" where we read the symbol "$\sim$" as "is distributed as". Similarly, we can write $X \sim f_X(x)$ or$X \sim F_X(x)$, if X and Y have the same distribution, $X \sim Y$.

Theorem A function $f_X(x)$ is a pdf (or pmf) of a random variable X if and only if

1. $f_X(x) \geqslant 0$ for all x.
2. $\int_{-\infty}^{\infty} f_X(x)dx = 1$ (pdf) or $\sum_x f_X(x) = 1$ (pmf).

Example Suppose $\lambda > 0, F(x) = 1 - e^{-\lambda x}$ for $x > 0$ and $F(x) = 0$ otherwise. Is $F(x)$ a cdf? What is the associated pdf?
solution:

Note

- If X is a continuous random variable, then $f(x)$ is not the probability that $X = x$. In fact, if X is an absolutely continuous random variable with density function $f(x)$, then $\Pr(X = x) = 0$. (Why?)
  proof

- Because $\Pr(X = a) = 0$, all the following are equivalent:

$$\Pr(a \leqslant X \leqslant b), \quad \Pr(a \leqslant X < b) \quad , \quad \Pr(a < X \leqslant b) \quad \text{and} \quad \Pr(a < X < b)$$

- $f(x)$ can exceed one!