

1.3: Descriptive Statistics

Learning Objectives

- Define "descriptive statistics"
- Distinguish between descriptive statistics and inferential statistics

Descriptive statistics are numbers that are used to summarize and describe data. The word "data" refers to the information that has been collected from an experiment, a survey, a historical record, etc. (By the way, "data" is plural. One piece of information is called a "datum.") If we are analyzing birth certificates, for example, a descriptive statistic might be the percentage of certificates issued in New York State, or the average age of the mother. Any other number we choose to compute also counts as a descriptive statistic for the data from which the statistic is computed. Several descriptive statistics are often used at one time, to give a full picture of the data.

Descriptive statistics are just descriptive. They do not involve generalizing beyond the data at hand. Generalizing from our data to another set of cases is the business of inferential statistics, which you'll be studying in another Section. Here we focus on (mere) descriptive statistics. Some descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1.3.1. The table shows the average salaries for various occupations in the United States in 1999. (Click [here](#) to see how much individuals with other occupations earn.)

Table 1.3.1: Average salaries for various occupations in 1999.

Salary	Occupation
\$112,760	pediatricians
\$106,130	dentists
\$100,090	podiatrists
\$ 76,140	physicists
\$ 53,410	architects
\$ 49,720	school, clinical, and counseling psychologists
\$ 47,910	flight attendants
\$ 39,560	elementary school teachers
\$ 38,710	police officers
\$ 18,980	floral designers

Descriptive statistics like these offer insight into American society. It is interesting to note, for example, that we pay the people who educate our children and who protect our citizens a great deal less than we pay people who take care of our feet or our teeth.

For more descriptive statistics, consider Table 1.3.2 which shows the number of unmarried men per 100 unmarried women in U.S. Metro Areas in 1990. From this table we see that men outnumber women most in Jacksonville, NC, and women outnumber men most in Sarasota, FL. You can see that descriptive statistics can be useful if we are looking for an opposite-sex partner! (These data come from the Information Please Almanac.)

Table 1.3.2: Number of unmarried men per 100 *unmarried women in U.S. Metro Areas in 1990.*

Cities with mostly men	Men per 100 Women	Cities with mostly women	Men per 100 Women
1. Jacksonville, NC	224	1. Sarasota, FL	66
2. Killeen-Temple, TX	123	2. Bradenton, FL	68
3. Fayetteville, NC	118	3. Altoona, PA	69
4. Brazoria, TX	117	4. Springfield, IL	70
5. Lawton, OK	116	5. Jacksonville, TN	70

Cities with mostly men	Men per 100 Women	Cities with mostly women	Men per 100 Women
6. State College, PA	113	6. Gadsden, AL	70
7. Clarksville-Hopkinsville, TN-KY	113	7. Wheeling, WV	70
8. Anchorage, Alaska	112	8. Charleston, WV	71
9. Salinas-Seaside-Monterey, CA	112	9. St. Joseph, MO	71
10. Bryan-College Station, TX	111	10. Lynchburg, VA	71

NOTE: Unmarried includes never-married, widowed, and divorced persons, 15 years or older.

These descriptive statistics may make us ponder why the numbers are so disparate in these cities. One potential explanation, for instance, as to why there are more women in Florida than men may involve the fact that elderly individuals tend to move down to the Sarasota region and that women tend to outlive men. Thus, more women might live in Sarasota than men. However, in the absence of proper data, this is only speculation.

You probably know that descriptive statistics are central to the world of sports. Every sporting event produces numerous statistics such as the shooting percentage of players on a basketball team. For the Olympic marathon (a foot race of 26.2 miles), we possess data that cover more than a century of competition. (The first modern Olympics took place in 1896.) Table 1.3.3 shows the winning times for both men and women (the latter have only been allowed to compete since 1984).

Table 1.3.3: Winning Olympic marathon times.

Women			
Year	Winner	Country	Time
1984	Joan Benoit	USA	2:24:52
1988	Rosa Mota	POR	2:25:40
1992	Valentina Yegorova	UT	2:32:41
1996	Fatuma Roba	ETH	2:26:05
2000	Naoko Takahashi	JPN	2:23:14
2004	Mizuki Noguchi	JPN	2:26:20
Men			
Year	Winner	Country	Time
1896	Spiridon Louis	GRE	2:58:50
1900	Michel Theato	FRA	2:59:45
1904	Thomas Hicks	USA	3:28:53
1906	Billy Sherring	CAN	2:51:23
1908	Johnny Hayes	USA	2:55:18
1912	Kenneth McArthur	S. Afr.	2:36:54
1920	Hannes Kolehmainen	FIN	2:32:35
1924	Albin Stenroos	FIN	2:41:22
1928	Boughra El Ouafi	FRA	2:32:57
1932	Juan Carlos Zabala	ARG	2:31:36

Women			
1936	Sohn Kee-Chung	JPN	2:29:19
1948	Delfo Cabrera	ARG	2:34:51
1952	Emil Ztopek	CZE	2:23:03
1956	Alain Mimoun	FRA	2:25:00
1960	Abebe Bikila	ETH	2:15:16
1964	Abebe Bikila	ETH	2:12:11
1968	Mamo Wolde	ETH	2:20:26
1972	Frank Shorter	USA	2:12:19
1976	Waldemar Cierpinski	E.Ger	2:09:55
1980	Waldemar Cierpinski	E.Ger	2:11:03
1984	Carlos Lopes	POR	2:09:21
1988	Gelindo Bordin	ITA	2:10:32
1992	Hwang Young-Cho	S. Kor	2:13:23
1996	Josia Thugwane	S. Afr.	2:12:36
2000	Gezahenge Abera	ETH	2:10:10
2004	Stefano Baldini	ITA	2:10:55

There are many descriptive statistics that we can compute from the data in the table. To gain insight into the improvement in speed over the years, let us divide the men's times into two pieces, namely, the first 13 races (up to 1952) and the second 13 (starting from 1956). The mean winning time for the first 13 races is 2 hours, 44 minutes, and 22 seconds (written 2 : 44 : 22). The mean winning time for the second 13 races is 2 : 13 : 18. This is quite a difference (over half an hour). Does this prove that the fastest men are running faster? Or is the difference just due to chance, no more than what often emerges from chance differences in performance from year to year? We can't answer this question with descriptive statistics alone. All we can affirm is that the two means are "suggestive."

Examining Table 3 leads to many other questions. We note that Takahashi (the lead female runner in 2000) would have beaten the male runner in 1956 and all male runners in the first 12 marathons. This fact leads us to ask whether the gender gap will close or remain constant. When we look at the times within each gender, we also wonder how much they will decrease (if at all) in the next century of the Olympics. Might we one day witness a sub-2 hour marathon? The study of statistics can help you make reasonable guesses about the answers to these questions.

- Mikki Hebl

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