Variables and the unit of observation

StatPREP Class Activity

## Orientation

There’s an expression about how to accomplish a complex, confusing, and difficult task: *One step at a time.* The purpose of this lesson is to provide you with a step-by-step procedure for working with data. Each step can be straightforward. Some steps involve informing yourself about the data at hand. Some steps require creativity and insight about the real-world system the data represents. Some steps require application of a particular technical procedure.

Here are steps for getting started with a data frame that’s already available to you.

1. Find out what is the *unit of observation*, that is, what each row stands for.
2. Find out what are the *variables*, the name of each, and what each one stands for.
3. Choose a *response variable*.
4. Select one or more *explanatory variables* which you suspect might account for the response variable.
5. Examine *how much* of the variation in the response variable is accounted for by the explanatory variables.
6. Describe in words and numbers the *pattern of the relationship* between the explanatory variables and the response variable.

In this lesson, you’re going to work on steps (1) and (2).

## Activity

You’ll use the [variables-and-units Little App](https://dtkaplan.shinyapps.io/LA_point_plot/) for this lesson. (See footnote[[1]](#footnote-23)). Open the little app and select the NHANES data.

Steps (1) and (2) are to find out about the data frame: What is the unit of analysis and what are the variables. A standard place to get information about a data frame is the *codebook* for the data frame, which is the descriptive documentation about the data.

1. Go to the ***Codebook*** tab in the app. The documentation will appear. The *unit of observation* is the kind of “thing” each row of the data is about.
   * Read the description section of the codebook. This often contains clues about the unit of observation. Note the words “survey,” “individuals,” “interviewed.”

* *What do you think is the unit of observation?*   .  .

1. The variables are described further on in the codebook.
   * Some variables have simple names like Age. Find a few other variables whose meaning is obvious to you even without looking at the description in the codebook.

* *Write down the names of a few obvious variables.*   .  .
* + Some variables have names that are more like a codeword, like BPSysAve. Find a few variables with such names and see if the description of the variable’s meaning helps you understand what the variable is about.
* *Are there any variables for which even the description in the codebook doesn’t help you understand? Write down one and speculate what it might be about.*   .  .

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1. <https://dtkaplan.shinyapps.io/LA_point_plot/> [↑](#footnote-ref-23)