

# The STRengthening Analytical Thinking for Observational Studies (STRATOS) initiative – aims, concept and the general approach

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<http://stratos-initiative.org/>

**STRATOS**  
I N I T I A T I V E



# Overview

- The STRATOS initiative – Why?
- Key issues of topic group 2:  
selection of variables and their functional forms
- Comparison of statistical methods: How?

# The STRATOS initiative – Why?

## Current situation in statistical methodology

- Statistical methodology has seen substantial development
- Computer facilities can be viewed as the cornerstone
- Possible to assess properties and compare complex model building strategies using simulation studies
- Resampling and Bayesian methods allow investigations that were impossible two decades ago
- Wealth of new statistical software packages allows a rapid implementation and verification of new statistical ideas

# Software package STATA

## new procedures in 2018

Announcing  
**STATA** release **15**

Order

Upgrade

### ERM=Endogeneity + Selection + Treatment

Combine endogenous covariates, sample selection, and endogenous treatment in models for continuous, binary, ordered, and censored outcomes.

Take your causal inference to a whole new level.

[Learn more >](#)



### Latent class analysis (LCA)



Discover and understand the unobserved groupings in your data. Use LCA's model-based classification to find out

- how many groups you have,
- who is in those groups, and
- what makes those groups distinct.

[Learn more >](#)

### bayes: logistic ... and 44 more

Continuous  
Binary  
Categorical  
Multilevel models  
Conspicuous  
Regression  
Sample selection  
Panel data  
Zero-inflated  
Survival

Type **bayes:** in front of any of 45 Stata estimation commands to fit a Bayesian regression model.

[Learn more >](#)

### Markdown & dynamic documents

Type this,

```

---
title: "My report"
author: "John Doe"
date: "2018-01-01"
---

```

Get this,



- Create webpages from Stata
- Intermix text, regressions, results, graphs, etc.
- See changes in data or commands automatically reflected on webpage

[Learn more >](#)

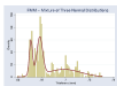
### Linearized DSGEs

$$\begin{aligned}
 p_t &= \beta E_t(p_{t+1}) + \kappa x_t \\
 x_t &= E_t(x_{t+1}) - (r_t - E_t(p_{t+1}) - z_t) \\
 r_t &= \psi p_t + u_t \\
 u_{t+1} &= \rho_u u_t + \epsilon_{t+1} \\
 z_{t+1} &= \rho_z z_t + \xi_{t+1}
 \end{aligned}$$

Write your model in simple algebraic form. Stata does the rest: solve model, estimate parameters, estimate policy and transition matrices (with CIs), estimate and graph IRFs, and perform forecasts.

[Learn more >](#)

### Finite mixture models (FMMs)



- 17 estimators and combinations
- Continuous, binary, count, ordinal, categorical, censored, and truncated outcomes
- Survival outcomes

[Learn more >](#)

### Spatial autoregressive models

Because

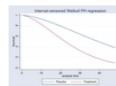
sometimes

where you are

matters.

[Learn more >](#)

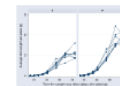
### Interval-censored survival models



Fit any of Stata's six parametric survival models to interval-censored data. All the usual survival features are supported: stratified estimation, robust and clustered SEs, survey data, graphs, and more.

[Learn more >](#)

### Nonlinear multilevel mixed-effects models



When ...  
your science ...  
says ...  
your model ...  
is ...  
nonlinear in its parameters

[Learn more >](#)

### Mixed logit models: Advanced choice modeling

Do you walk to work, ride a bus, or drive your car? Which of three insurance plans do you buy? Which political party do you vote for? We make dozens of choices every day. Researchers have access to gaggles of data about those choices. Mixed logit introduces random effects into choice modeling and thereby relaxes the IIA assumption and increases model flexibility.

[Learn more >](#)

### Nonparametric regression



When you know something matters.


But have no idea how.

[Learn more >](#)

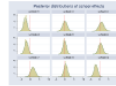
### Create Word documents from Stata

- Automate your reports
- Write paragraphs and tables to Word documents
- Embed Stata results and graphs in paragraphs and tables
- Customize formatting of text, tables, and cells

[Learn more >](#)

 Create PDFs, too!

### Bayesian multilevel models

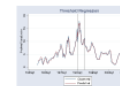


Small number of groups?  
Many hierarchical levels?  
Prefer making probability statements?

Consider Bayesian multilevel modeling.

[Learn more >](#)

### Threshold regression



Your time-series regression may change parameters at some point in time or at multiple points in time. The activity of foraging animals might follow a completely different pattern at temperatures above some threshold. You may not know the value of that threshold. Finding such thresholds and estimating the parameters within the regimes is what threshold regression does.

[Learn more >](#)

### Panel-data tobit with random coefficients

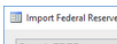


Stata has long had estimators for random effects (random intercepts) in panel data.

Now you can have random coefficients, too.

[Learn more >](#)

### Search, browse, and import FRED data



### Multilevel regression for interval-measured outcomes

Incomes are sometimes recorded in groupings, as are people's weights, insect counts, grade-point averages, and hundreds of other measures. Often

### Multilevel tobit regression for censored outcomes

- Left-censoring, right-censoring, both

### Panel-data cointegration tests



### Tests for multiple breaks in time series



# Splines

## a brief overview of regression packages in R

Package	Downloads	Vignette	Book	Website	Datasets
quantreg	2001231	X	X		7
mgcv	1438166	X	X		2
survival	1229305	X	X		33
VGAM	297308	X	X	X	50
gbm	271362			X	3
gam	168143		X	X	1
gamlss	78295	X	X	X	29

Perperoglou et al, talk at ISCB 2017, see STRATOS website

# Current situation in practical analyses

- Unfortunately, many sensible improvements are ignored

## Reasons why improved strategies are ignored

- Overwhelming concern with **theoretical aspects**
- Very **limited guidance** on key issues that are **vital in practice**, discourages analysts from utilizing more sophisticated and possibly more appropriate methods in their analyses

# Statistical methodology – problems are well known

The severeness of problems is even discussed in the public press:

The Economist ‘Unreliable research: Trouble at the lab.’ (October 2013):

“Scientists’ grasp of statistics has not kept pace with the development of complex mathematical techniques for crunching data. Some scientists use **inappropriate techniques** because those are the ones **they feel comfortable with**; others latch on to **new ones without understanding their subtleties**. Some just rely on the **methods built into their software**, even if they **don’t understand** them.”

## Comment (Introduction)

### How should medical science change?

In 2009, we published a Viewpoint by Iain Chalmers and Paul Glasziou called “Avoidable waste in the production and reporting of research evidence”, which made the extraordinary claim that as much as 85% of research investment was wasted.

*Kleinert and Horton, 2014*

“Although this vast enterprise has led to substantial health improvements, many more gains are possible if the waste and inefficiency in the ways that biomedical research is chosen, designed, done, analysed, regulated, managed, disseminated, and reported can be addressed.”

*Macleod et al., 2014*



# Better use of statistical methods

- At least two tasks are essential:
  1. **Experts** in specific methodological areas have to work towards **developing guidance**
  2. An ever-increasing need for **continuing education** at all stages of the career
- For busy applied researchers it is often difficult to follow methodological progress even in their principal application area
  - Reasons are diverse
  - Consequence is that analyses are often deficient
- **Knowledge** gained through research on statistical methodology needs to be **transferred** to the broader community
- Many **analysts** would be **grateful for** an overview on the current **state of the art** and for **practical guidance**

# Aims of the initiative

- **Provide evidence supported guidance** for highly relevant issues in the design and analysis of observational studies
- As the **statistical knowledge** of the analyst **varies** substantially, guidance has to keep this background in mind. **Guidance** has to be provided **at several levels**
- For the **start** we will concentrate on **state-of-the-art** guidance and the necessary evidence
- Help to identify questions requiring much more primary research

**The overarching long-term aim is to improve key parts of design and statistical analyses of observational studies in practice**

# Different levels of statistical knowledge

## **Level 1: Low statistical knowledge**

- Most analyses are done by analysts at that level

## **Level 2: Experienced statistician**

- Methodology perhaps slightly below state of the art, but doable by every experienced analyst

## **Level 3: Expert in a specific area**

- To improve statistical models and to adapt them to complex real problems, researches develop new and more complicated approaches. Advantages and usefulness in practice need to be assessed

# STRengthening Analytical Thinking for Observational Studies: the STRATOS initiative

Willi Sauerbrei,<sup>a\*†</sup> Michal Abrahamowicz,<sup>b</sup>  
Douglas G. Altman,<sup>c</sup> Saskia le Cessie,<sup>d</sup> and<sup>‡</sup> James Carpenter<sup>e</sup>  
on behalf of the STRATOS initiative

Statistics in Medicine 2014

2011	ISCB Ottawa, Epidemiology Sub-Comm.	Preliminary ideas
2012	ISCB Bergen	Discussions, SG
2013	ISCB Munich	Initiative launched
2014-16	ISCB	Invited Sessions
<b>2016</b>	<b>BIRS</b>	<b>First general meeting</b>
2016	IBC Victoria	Invited Session
2016	HEC Munich	Invited Session
2017	IBS-EMR Thessaloniki	Invited Session
2017	ISCB Vigo	Scientific topic
2017	CEN-ISBS Vienna	Invited Session
2017	GMDS Oldenburg	Invited Session
2018	ISCB, RSS, ...	Invited Sessions
<b>2019</b>	<b>BIRS</b>	<b>Second general meeting</b>

<http://www.stratos-initiative.org/>

# Topic groups

Topic Group		Chairs
1	Missing data	James Carpenter, Kate Lee
2	Selection of variables and functional forms in multivariable analysis	Georg Heinze, Aris Perperoglou, Willi Sauerbrei
3	Initial data analysis	Marianne Huebner, Saskia le Cessie, Werner Vach
4	Measurement error and misclassification	Laurence Freedman, Victor Kipnis
5	Study design	Mitchell Gail, Suzanne Cadarette
6	Evaluating diagnostic tests and prediction models	Gary Collins, Carl Moons, Ewout Steyerberg
7	Causal inference	Els Goetghebeur, Ingeborg Waernbaum
8	Survival analysis	Michal Abrahamowicz, Per Kragh Andersen, Terry Therneau
9	High-dimensional data	Lisa McShane, Joerg Rahnenfuehrer

# Cross-cutting panels

Panel		Chairs and Co-Chairs	
MP	Membership	Chairs:	James Carpenter, Willi Sauerbrei
PP	Publications	Chairs:	Bianca De Stavola, Stephen Walter
		Co-Chairs:	Mitchell Gail, Petra Macaskill
GP	Glossary	Chairs:	Simon Day, Marianne Huebner, Jim Slattery
WP	Website	Chairs:	Joerg Rahnenfuehrer, Willi Sauerbrei
RP	Literature Review	Chairs:	Gary Collins, Carl Moons
BP	Bibliography	Chairs:	to be determined
SP	Simulation Studies	Chairs:	Michal Abrahamowicz, Anne-Laure Boulesteix
DP	Data Sets	Chairs:	Saskia Le Cessie, Aris Perperoglou
TP	Knowledge Translation	Chair:	Suzanne Cadarette
		Co-Chair:	Catherine Quantin
CP	Contact Organisations	Chairs:	Willi Sauerbrei
VP	Visualisation	Chairs:	Mark Baillie

**Necessity of STRATOS illustrated by listing  
key issues of TG2:**

**Selection of variables and their functional  
forms in multivariable analysis**

# Building multivariable regression models – some preliminaries

- Initial data analysis (TG3)
- ‚Reasonable‘ model class was chosen
- • •



# Aim of a model and model complexity

Most important distinction:  
**„to explain or to predict“** (Shmueli, 2010)

Prediction (TG6)

Here: **TG2**

model for explanation (or descriptive modelling)

Causal inference (TG7)

# TG2: Part 1 – Selection of variables

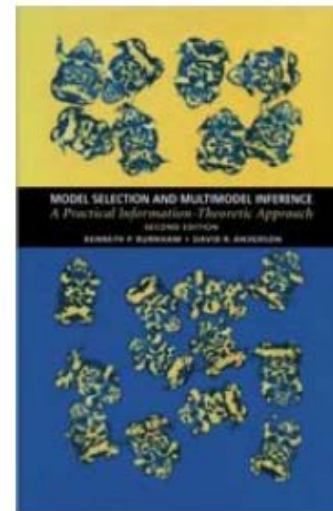
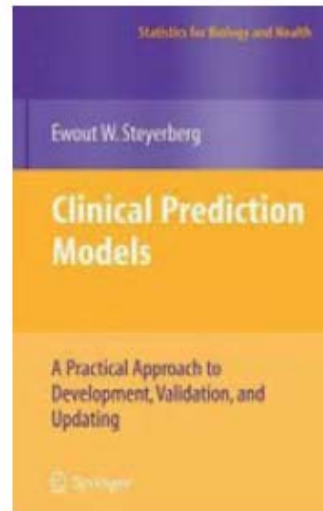
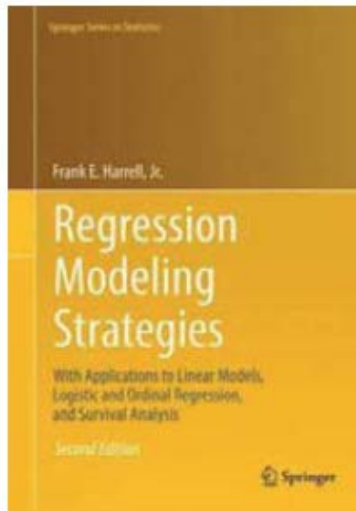
- Central issues:
  - To select or not to select (full model)?
  - Which variables to include?
- A large number of methods proposed (for many decades)
- High-dimensional data triggered the development of further proposals
- Many critical issues

# Opinions on variable selection

for models with focus on prediction and explanation



Variable selection



(Harrell, 2001; Steyerberg, 2009; Burnham & Anderson, 2002, Royston & Sauerbrei, 2008)

Heinze et al., BiomJ, 2018

- Different philosophies
- Emphasis on different aims

# "Recommendations" from the literature

We do **not know any** recommendation which is **supported by good evidence** from theory or meaningful simulation studies

Problem of the practicing statistician:

**What to do?**

# TG 2: Part 2 – selection of functional forms

- Assume linearity
  - Often ok but sometimes wrong. Can lead to wrong conclusions
- Cut-points
  - Many problems known for a long time. Nevertheless still very popular
- ‘Optimal’ cut-points
  - Worse than cutpoints
- Fractional polynomials and Splines
  - Flexible procedures but many open issues
  - More comparisons (simulation studies) needed

# TG 2: Part 3 – Combining variable and function selection

**Two inter-related questions**, common to many multivariable explanatory models

Results of data-dependent selections of independent variables may depend on

- decisions regarding functional forms of both
  1. the variable of interest (X)
  2. other variables, correlated with X

and *vice versa*

For survival data (TG8):

- Effects may vary in time
- Another interrelated issue

# TG 2 - State of the art?

- Which **strategies for variable selection** exist?  
What about their properties?
- Data-dependent modeling introduces bias.  
What about the role of **shrinkage** approaches?
- Comparison of **spline procedures** in a univariate context.  
Which criteria are relevant? Can we derive guidance for practice?
- What about variables with a '**spike-at-zero**'?
- **Multivariable procedures**  
MFP well defined strategy  
Which of the spline based procedures?
- Multivariable procedures and **correction for selection bias**  
How relevant? One step or two step approaches?  
E.g. selection of variables and forms followed by shrinkage
- **Big Data**  
Does it influence properties of procedures and their comparison?
- Role of model **validation**

**State-of-the-art - EVIDENCE is required!**

**Much research required!**


# Comparison of statistical methods

## How?

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Biometrical Journal →

### **On the necessity and design of studies comparing statistical methods**

Anne-Laure Boulesteix<sup>1</sup> 

Harald Binder<sup>2</sup>

Michal Abrahamowicz<sup>3</sup>

Willi Sauerbrei<sup>2</sup>

for the Simulation Panel of the STRATOS Initiative

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/bimj.201700129/full>



# More new methods needed?

“[...] in statistical research and related methodology-oriented fields such as machine learning or bioinformatics, the well-known adage ‘publish or perish’ could be translated into ‘**propose new methods or perish.**’

Such a research paradigm is **not favorable for studies that aim at meaningfully comparing alternative existing methods** or, more generally, studies assessing the behavior and properties of existing methods.

It becomes **more and more difficult to get an overview of existing methods**, not to mention the overview of their respective performances in different settings.”

# More (meta)research needed!

## No consensus on what makes a reliable comparison study

- Which designs are most appropriate?
- What are typical sources of potential biases and how can they be avoided?
- How can the results be interpreted without the tendency for overinterpretation?
- Which mixture of simulated and real data should be used?
- How should real data be selected?
- How should simulated data be generated in a realistic way inspired from real datasets?

**... Which? What? How?**

We need to recognize that there is no agreement among experts on the “state-of-the-art” methods for many topics relevant in practice.”

**Guidance for analysis is needed for many stakeholders (analysts with different levels of knowledge, teachers, reviewers, journalists, .....)**

**Researchers**

## **First in a Series of Papers for the Biometric Bulletin**

**STRATOS initiative – Guidance for designing and analyzing observational studies**

**STRATOS**  
INITIATIVE

Willi Sauerbrei<sup>1</sup>, Marianne Huebner<sup>2</sup>, Gary S. Collins<sup>3</sup>, Katherine Lee<sup>4</sup>, Laurence Freedman<sup>5</sup>, Mitchell Gail<sup>6</sup>, Els Goetghebeur<sup>7</sup>, Joerg Rahnenfuehrer<sup>8</sup> and Michal Abrahamowicz<sup>9</sup> on behalf of the STRATOS initiative.

➔ Short papers from

- TG1** – missing data
- TG4** – measurement error and misclassification
- TG3** – initial data analysis
- TG2** – Variable and function selection have appeared

**Consumers**

## **Guidance for designing and analysing observational studies:**

The STRengthening Analytical Thinking for Observational Studies (STRATOS) initiative



**Willi Sauerbrei<sup>1</sup>, Gary S. Collins<sup>2</sup>,  
Marianne Huebner<sup>3</sup>, Stephen D. Walter<sup>4</sup>,  
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