

Electronic version of an article published as **Liggemeyer P, Engels G, Münch J, Dörr J, Riegel N (Hrsg): Software Engineering 2009, 02-06. März 2009 in Kaiserslautern, LNI P-143, pp. 151-162**

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The vital few and trivial many: An empirical analysis of the Pareto Distribution of defects

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Abstract: The Pareto Principle is a universal principle of the “vital few and trivial many”. According to this principle, the 80/20 rule has been formulated with the following meaning: For many phenomena, 80% of the consequences originate from 20% of the causes. In this paper, we applied the Pareto Principle to software testing and analysed 9 open source projects (OSPs) across several releases. The results show that a small number of files account for the majority of defects, even across several releases. In contrast, there is no evidence that this small part of files containing most of the defects also makes up only a small part of the system’s code size. The contributions of this paper are twofold: It is the first study analysing the Pareto distribution for OSPs. Second, it is the most detailed study that analyses the Pareto distribution of defects comprising nine large OSPs which increases the empirical body of knowledge in this area.

1 Introduction

The Pareto Principle, also known as the 80-20 rule has been originally analysed by Vilfredo Pareto [Re05] who observed that 80% of property in Italy was owned by 20% of the Italian population. Juran [JG88] generalized this principle he called the “vital few and trivial many”, stating that most of the results in any context are raised by a small number of causes. This principle is often being applied in several contexts, e.g. in sales, stating that 20% of the customers are responsible for 80% of the sales volume. One of the first studies that translated this principle to the software engineering area is reported in [En79]. The author analyses the distribution of defects in an operating system developed at IBM laboratories. The distribution of about 430 defects over about 500 modules has been analysed and confirms the Pareto Principle, i.e. approximately 80% of the defects were contained in 20% of the modules.

Two main hypotheses related to the Pareto Principle form the basis of this study. First, we want to analyse whether a small part of files accounts for the majority of defects. Second, if this is the case, we want to determine whether this small part of files also constitute a small part of the system’s code size. Knowing the validity of Pareto Principle in the testing context is very valuable for testers, because they can focus their testing activities on the “vital few” files accounting for most of the defects. From the

research perspective, this study increases the empirical body of knowledge in the area of defect distribution. First, by replicating empirical studies conducted before, more general conclusions can be derived. Second, to our knowledge, this is the first study that focuses on the analysis of the Pareto Principle for OSPs. Thus, differences and similarities concerning defect distributions in OSPs and commercial systems can be figured out. In addition, this is the first study analysing this principle to that extent, including data from 9 large OSPs.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: The design of our study is described in Section 2, including hypotheses, characteristics of the analysed projects, as well as data collection procedures. In Section 3, the results of our empirical study are presented. In Section 4, we discuss the threats to validity and in Section 5 an overview of related work is given. Finally, Section 6 concludes the paper.

2 Study Design

In this paper, we use the definition of defects and failures provided in [IS07]: A **defect or fault** is “a flaw in a component or system that can cause the component or system to fail to perform its required function. A defect, if encountered during execution, may cause a failure of the component or system”. Thus, a **failure** is the observable “deviation of the component or system from its expected delivery, service or result“. **Defect count** is the number of defects identified in a software entity. In this paper, we count the number of defects of a file. The file *a* is more **fault-prone** than the file *b* if the defect count of the file *a* is higher than the defect count of the file *b*. In the subsequent Sections details on the experiment are described.

2.1 Hypotheses

In this paper, the following hypotheses related to the Pareto Principle will be analysed:

- **Hypothesis 1, Pareto distribution of defects in files:** A small number of files accounts for the majority of the defects.
- **Hypothesis 2, Pareto distribution of defects in files across releases:** If the Pareto Principle applies to one release, then it applies to all releases of a software project.
- **Hypothesis 3, Pareto distribution of defects in code:** A small part of the system’s code size accounts for the majority of the defects.
- **Hypothesis 4, Pareto distribution of defects in code across releases:** If the Pareto Principle applies to one release, then it applies to all releases of a software project.

2.2 Subject Projects

In this study, we analysed 9 OSPs. As required in [Ha08], we applied the following

criteria to select the OSPs: (1) The project is of a large size in order to permit significant results. Thus, the size of the selected projects ranges from about 70.000 LOC to about 240.000 LOC. (2) A well documented defect history is available. Thus, we searched for projects for which a bug tracking system is available. (3) The project is mature so that effects will have appeared if present. According to this criterion, we selected projects with a number of check-ins in a versioning control system (we call them history touches - HT) greater than 50.000. (4) The source code is available for at least one release. We included one project, OSCache that does not fulfil the criteria defined above, in order to compare the results obtained for all other projects with a smaller but mature¹ project.

Apache Ant (Ant)² is a Java application for automating the build process. **Apache Formatting Objects Processor** (Apache FOP)³ reads a formatting object (FO) tree and renders the resulting pages to a specified output, e.g. PDF. **Chemistry Development Kit** (CDK)⁴ is a Java library for bio- and chemo-informatics and computational chemistry. **Freenet**⁵ is a distributed anonymous information storage and retrieval system. **Jetspeed2**⁶ is an open portal platform and enterprise information portal. **Jmol**⁷ is a „Java molecular viewer for three-dimensional chemical structures. **OSCache**⁸ is a Java application which allows performing fine grained dynamic caching of JSP content, servlet responses or arbitrary objects. **Pentaho**⁹ is a Java based business intelligence platform. **TV-Browser**¹⁰ is a Java based TV guide. Table 1 summarizes the attributes of the analyzed projects.

Table 1. Subject Programs

OS-Project	Project since	# Defects	# HTs	LOC	# Files
1. Ant (1.7.0)	2000	4804	62763	234253	1550
2. FOP (0.94)	2002*	1478	30772	192792	1020
3. CDK (1.0.1)	2001*	602	55757	227037	1038
4. Freenet (0.7)	1999*	1598	53887	68238	464
5. Jetspeed2 (2.1.2)	2005	630	36235	236254	1410
6. Jmol (11.2)	2001*	421	39981	117732	332
7. Oscache (2.4.1)	2000	2365	1433	19702	113
8. Pentaho (1.6.0)	2005*	856	58673	209540	570
9. TV-Browser (2.6)	2003	190	38431	170981	1868

A * behind the data in the column “Project since” denotes the date of the registration of the project in SourceForge¹¹. For the rest, the year of the first commit in the versioning system is indicated. The column “OS-Project” contains the name of the project followed by the project’s latest version for which the metrics “LOC” (Lines of Code) and the number of files have been computed. The 3rd and the 4th columns contain the number of defects registered in the defect database and the number of HTs extracted from the VCS.

¹ The project exists since 2000.

² <http://ant.apache.org/>

³ <http://xmlgraphics.apache.org/fop/index.html>

⁴ <http://sourceforge.net/projects/cdk/>

⁵ <http://freenetproject.org/whatis.html>

⁶ <http://portals.apache.org/jetspeed-2/>

⁷ <http://jmol.sourceforge.net/>

⁸ <http://www.opensymphony.com/oscache/>

⁹ <http://sourceforge.net/projects/pentaho/>

¹⁰ <http://www.tvbrowser.org/>

¹¹ <http://sourceforge.net/>

2.3 Data collection

Defect tracking systems contain information on the defects recorded during the lifetime of a project, amongst others the defect ID and additional, detailed information on the defect. However, they usually do not give any information which files are affected by the defect. Therefore, information contained in VCS has to be analysed in order to compute the number of defects per files. For this purpose, we extract the information contained in the VCS into a history table in a data base. Additionally, we extract the defects of the corresponding project into a defect table in the same data base. Then, we use a 3-level algorithm to determine the defect count per file.

Direct search: First, we search for messages in the history table containing the defect-IDs from the defect table. Messages containing the defect-ID and a text pattern, e.g. “fixed” or “removed”, are indicators for defects that have been removed. In this case, the number of defects of the corresponding file has to be increased. **Keyword search:** In the second step, we search for keywords, e.g. “defect fixed”, “problem fixed”, within the messages which have not been investigated in the step before. We use about 50 keywords. **Multi-defects keyword search:** In the last step, we search for keywords which give some hints that more than one defect has been removed (e.g. „two defects fixed“). In this case, we increase the number of defects accordingly. We used SPSS¹², version 11.5, for all statistical analyses.

3 Results

In this Section the results of this study will be presented.

3.2 Hypothesis 1: Pareto distribution of defects in files

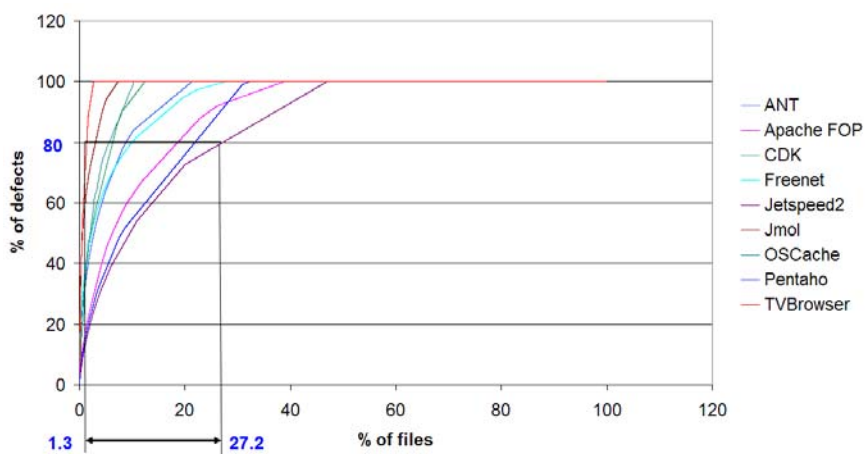
The first hypothesis related to the 80/20 rule concerns the distribution of defects in files. All OSPs presented in Section 2.2 have been analysed graphically in order to verify this hypothesis. Figure 1 shows the Alberg Diagram suggested by Fenton and Ohlsson [FO00] for the graphical analysis of the Pareto Principle. Thus, files are ordered in decreasing order with respect to the number of defects. Then the cumulated number of defects is plotted on the y-Axis of the Alberg diagram relative to the percentage of files (plotted on the x-Axis). For example, in the case of the Jetspeed2 project, 80% of the defects are contained in 27% of the files. Figure 1(a) shows the distribution of defects of all analysed OSPs within one Alberg diagram, whereas Figure 1(b) shows the percentage of files accounting for about 80% of defects as a bar chart.

Consequently, approximately 80% of the defects are concentrated in a range of 1.3% (in the case of the TVBrowser project) to 27.2% (in the case of the Jetspeed2 project) of files. Thus, the TVBrowser project shows the strongest focus of defects on a very small part of the files. Only one project shows a concentration of 80% of defects in clearly more than 20% of the files. This is the case of the Jetspeed2 project, with 27.2%. In case of the Pentaho project, 21.9% of the files contain 80% of the defects that can be

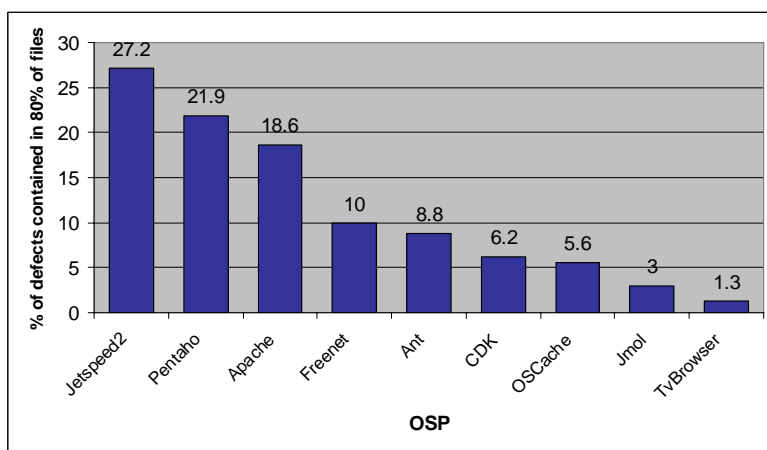
¹² SPSS, <http://www.spss.com/>

considered much closer to the 20% formulated in the hypothesis.

Based on this analysis, Hypothesis 1 can be largely confirmed for OSPs: *A small number of files account for the majority of the defects in OSPs. 7 OSPs show an even stronger focus of the majority of defects on a small part of files than required by the 80/20-rule. This is the case of TVBrowser, Jmol, OSCache, CDK, Ant and Freenet. Two other projects are closed to the 80/20 rule.*



(a)



(b)

Figure 1 – Pareto distribution of defects. (a) Distribution of defects for each OSP in an Alberg diagram; (b) Percentage of defects contained in 80% of the most fault-prone files

3.3 Hypothesis 2: Pareto distribution of defects in files across releases

In order to analyse this hypothesis, the percentage of the most fault-prone files containing 80% of the defects has been computed for several releases of the OSPs. Table 2 shows the results. The first column contains name of the OSP, followed by the number of the analysed releases. The next two columns indicate the absolute and, respectively, the relative number of releases for which about 80% of the defects are concentrated in a small percentage (below 25%) of files. The column “Range” indicates the range for the concentration of defects. For example, the concentration of defects in the ANT project ranges from 8.23% to 24.97% of the files depending on the analysed release.

OSP	Number of analysed releases	Pareto distribution holds for ...		Range	100% of defects contained in less than 25% of the files. This holds for ...	
		Absolute # of analysed releases	Percentage of the analysed releases		Absolute # of analysed releases	Percentage of the analysed releases
1. ANT	5	5	100%	8.23% - 24.97%	4	80%
2. ApacheFOP	4	4	100%	12.02% - 24.79%	1	25%
3. CDK	7	7	100%	3.14% - 20.56%	7	100%
4. Freenet	6	6	100%	1.95% - 17.29%	2	17%
5. Jetspeed2	3	2	66.67%	19.03% - 67.73%	0	0
6. Jmol	9	9	100%	1.52% - 17.42%	8	89%
7. OSCache	4	4	100%	3.95% - 13.98%	4	100%
8. Pentaho	3	2	66.67%	9.12% - 35.12%	1	33%
9. TVBrowser	4	4	100%	2.69% - 29.32%	3	75%

Table 2 – Pareto Distribution of defects in files across releases

For 7 of the 9 analyses OSPs, 80% of the defects are contained in less than 20% of the most fault-prone files. The concentration of the defects ranges from 1.52% in the case of the Jmol project to 35.12%, in case of one analysed release of the Pentaho project. One exception is the Pentaho project. In one of the analysed releases, the defects are not concentrated on a few files but rather distributed among 67.73% of the files.

In many releases of the analysed OSPs, we observed a high concentration of defects on a very small number of files. Thus, we additionally determined the percentage of files that account for 100%, i.e. for **all** defects in a system. The last two columns in Table 2 show the absolute and relative number of releases for which 100% of defects are contained in about 20 % of the files. Again, we used 25% of files as a threshold. In two thirds of the analysed releases of the OSPs (30 of 45), 100% of the defects are concentrated in less than 25% of the files. In 27 of 45 analysed releases, 100% of the defects are even contained in less than 20% of the files.

Based on the results of these analyses, it can be concluded that the Pareto Principle largely persists across several releases of a software project. The concentration intensity can vary slightly from release to release.

3.4 Hypothesis 3: Pareto distribution of defects in code

In order to analyse the Pareto hypothesis for code, the percentage of code that accounts for 80% of the defects contained in the most fault-prone files has been computed. Consequently, this analysis determines if the small part of the files responsible for most of the defects also represent a small part of the code. The results of this analysis are shown in Figure 2. On the X-axis, the analysed releases of the OSPs are indicated¹³. The line chart and the bar chart indicate for each release the percentage of files and the corresponding percentage of code that account for approximately 80% of the defects. For example, in the case of the Jmol 9 release, **10.18%** of the files that account for 80% of the defects make up **16.93%** of the system's code. Similarly, in the case of the Ant 1.6.1 release, **24.97%** of the files that account for 80% of the defects make up **89.42%** of the system's code.

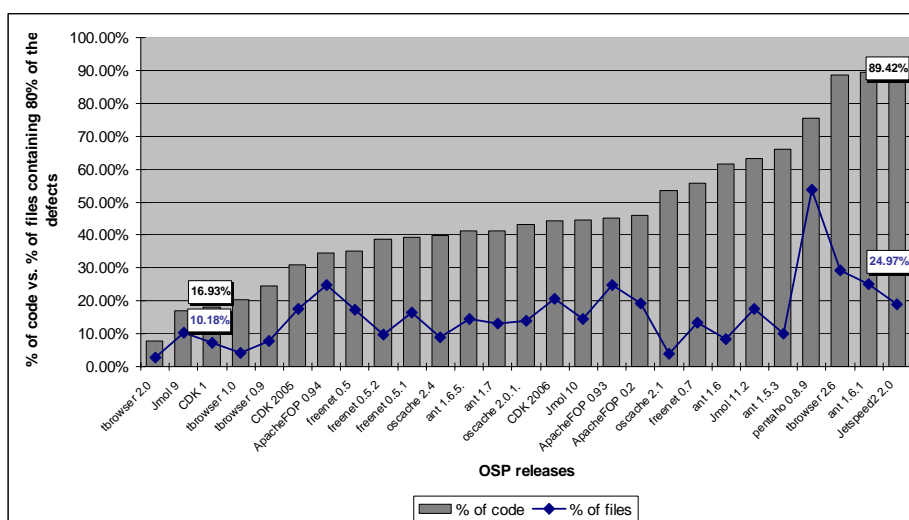


Figure 2 – Pareto distribution of defects in code

The concentration of the majority of the defects on a small part of the system's code is true only for a small part of the OSP releases. About 5 releases show a concentration of defects on less than about 25% of the code (TVBrowser 2.0, Jmol 9, CDK 1, TVBrowser 1.0, TVBrowser 0.9). Most of the analysed releases show a distribution of the defects on about 30% to about 60% of the code. For a small part of the releases, the defects are distributed on almost the whole system.

Based on this analysis, the hypothesis has to be rejected. A small part of the code accounts for the majority of the defects only in a few of the analysed cases. In addition, there is no evidence for the contrary hypothesis: If a small number of files account for the majority of the defects, it is because these files contain the most code. This statement

¹³ This analysis comprises all releases of the OSPs for which the source code is available.

is true for a small part of the analysed OSPs only.

3.5 Hypothesis 4: Pareto distribution of defects in code across releases

Since the Pareto hypothesis on the distribution of defects in code has been rejected, the hypothesis 4 has to be adjusted. For all cases, in which the Pareto hypotheses could be confirmed: Does the Pareto distribution of defects in code hold for all or at least for the most releases of an OSP? Despite the fact that Hypothesis 3 has been rejected, this research question is important to be analysed. If this is the case, it means that for a small part of OSPs the Pareto Principle is valid and it is worthwhile to perform further analyses in order to determine characteristics of such programs and to find out factors that favour such a distribution. Figure 3 show the distribution of 80% of the defects in code across releases for all OSPs for which at least one release shows a concentration of most of the defects on less than 20% of the code. The bar chart shows the percentage of code that contains 80% of the defects, and the line chart shows the percentage of files accounting for 80% of the defects. In the case of the CDK and the Jmol project, only a single release shows a concentration of most of the defects on a small part of the code. For the other analysed releases, the defects are distributed on about 30% to 63% of the code. In the case of the TVBrowser project, three of four analysed releases show a concentration of most of the defects on a small part of the code. The last analysed release, however, shows a high distribution of the defects on about 88% of the code.

Based on the results of this analysis, the hypothesis can not be confirmed. A concentration of most of the defects on a small part of the code in one release does not mean that this concentration will persist in consequent releases.

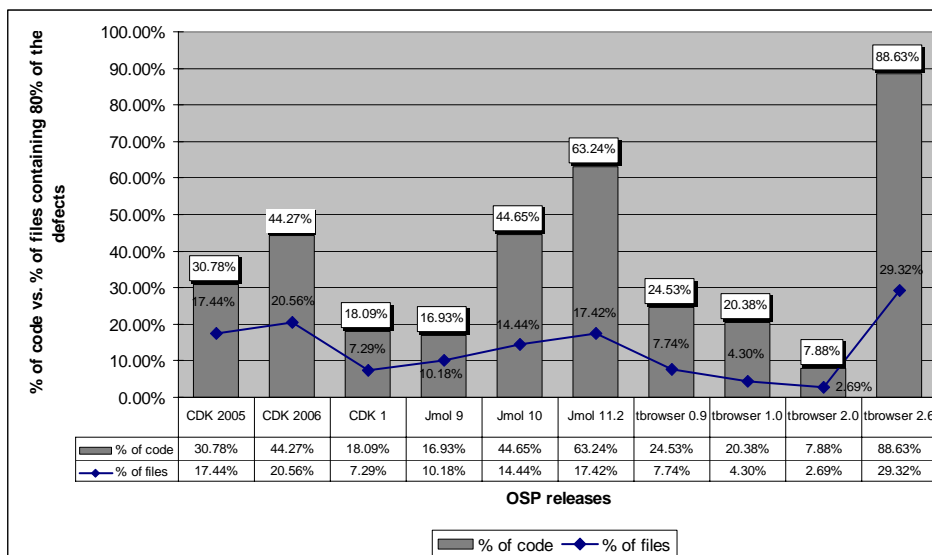


Figure 3 – Pareto distribution of defects in code across releases

4 Threats to validity

Internal validity is concerned with the degree to which conclusions about the causal effect of the independent variables on the dependent variable can be drawn [Wo00]. One threat to validity is that not all developers deliver meaningful messages when they check-in files. Developers, for example, can also check in files without specifying any reason, even though they had corrected a defect. Thus, the defect count of a file can be higher than the defect count computed by our algorithm. This concern is alleviated by the size of the analysed OSPs. **External validity** is concerned with the degree to which results can be generalized [Wo00]. This issue is alleviated by the number and diversity of the analysed OSPs. The more OSP programs show the same characteristics, the higher the probability that other OSP programs would also show these characteristics. Additionally, we choose programs from different application domains in order to increase the representativeness of the study results. Furthermore, analyses of additional programs that are intended in our future work would increase the external validity.

5 Related Work

There are several studies that analyse the **Pareto distribution of defects in files**. In contrast to our study, that analyses several releases of an OSP, most of the studies concentrate on analysing few or one releases of a system or do not detail the results per release. An exception is the study reported in [OW02]. In contrast to our study, all other studies consider commercial software. The Pareto distribution of defects in files is largely confirmed by most of the authors, i.e. most of the defects in commercial software concentrate on a small number of software entities (files or modules). The extent of the concentration varies from program to program. This is similar to the results obtained by studying OSPs in this paper.

The type of analysed defects differs from study to study. Roughly, the defect types can be categorized into pre-release¹⁴ and post-release¹⁵ defects. In one study, only one defect type has been analysed [En79]¹⁶. Three studies differentiate between pre-release and post-release defects [AR07], [OW02] and [FO00]. All other studies analyse pre-release and post-release defects altogether. When roughly categorizing the defects into pre-release vs. post-release defects, the following conclusions can be drawn: (1) The Pareto distribution of defects is true for pre-release, as well as for post-release defects. (2) Authors, who did not make distinction between pre-release and post-release defects, confirm the Pareto distribution of defects, too. (3) In the studies reported in [AR07], [OW02] and [FO00] that differentiate between pre-release and post-release defects, the concentration of defects on a small part of files is greater for post-release defects than it is the case for pre-release defects. [OW02] observe that there is a very small part of

¹⁴ Pre-release defects are defects reported *before* release, usually by developers and testers.

¹⁵ Post-release defects are defects reported *after* release, usually reported by developers, testers and in some case also by customers. The type of defects analysed and the reporters (when information is indicated in the study) are summarized in Table 3.

¹⁶ The analyses consider pre-release defects.

defects reported after release and these defects are concentrated in less than 1% of the files. The Pareto distribution for pre-release defects reported in [OW02] is similar to the overall Pareto distribution (observed when pre-release and post-release defects have been analysed altogether). A clear distinction between pre-release and post-release defects is not possible for OSPs. Thus, the results are comparable to those studies that considered pre-release and post-release defects altogether. The results of the studies in literature are summarised in Table 3.

Reference	Characteristics of the analysed projects	Confirmation?	Relationship	Kind of defects analysed
[En79]	One release of the operating system DOS/VS	Yes	21 – 78	pre-release defects: defects found during system testing
[AR07]	Three projects from a large company in the telecommunications domain.	Yes	20 – 87 (P1) 20 – 87 (P2) 20 – 80 (P3)	post-release defects ¹⁷
			20 – 63 (P1) 20 – 70 (P2) 20 – 70 (P3)	pre-release defects
[OA96]	Two consecutive releases of a telecommunication switching system	Yes	20 - 60	pre-release and post-release defects altogether: defects reported during function, system and site tests, as well as during the first months in operation ²¹
[KK96]	5 consecutive releases of a commercial telecommunications system	Yes	38 – 80	pre-release and post-release defects altogether: defects reported as "Failure Reports" reported from validation teams and from customers
[FO00]	Two releases of a major commercial system developed at Ericsson Telecom AB	Yes	20-60	pre-release and post-release defects altogether: defects reported during function test and system test by testers
			10 – 100 1 st release 10 – 80 2 nd release	post-release defects: defects reported during operation ²¹
[MK92]	Two distinct data sets from large commercial systems: command and control communication system, medical imaging system	Yes	20-65	pre-release and post-release defects altogether: defects recorded during system integration and test phases and for the first year of program deployment
[OW02]	Thirteen releases of a large industrial inventory tracking system	Yes	10 - 68 10 -100 (for the last four releases) ¹⁸ .	pre-release and post-release defects altogether: all kinds of defects recorded in one of these phases: development, unit testing, integration testing, system testing, beta release, controlled release, and general release. The Pareto Principle is also true for pre-release and post-release defects.
			pre-release, 36 – 80, 3 – 80 (in later releases) post-release 1/2 - 80	separate analysis for pre-release and post-release defects.

Table 3 – Pareto analyses in literature

[OW02] is the only study that analyses the Pareto distribution across several consecutive releases. They observe that the concentration of defects on a small part of files becomes

¹⁷ It is not clear, whether post-release defects include the defects reported by the test team only or by the customers, too.

¹⁸ Concentration of defects on a small number of files gets increases as system matures.

stronger when the system matures. This result differs from those of the analysed OSPs. In the case of the OSPs, the concentration remains low across nearly all releases of the analysed OSPs, but the extent to which defects are concentrated on a part of the files varies from release to release.

Similarly to the results of the OSP analyses, there is little evidence for the **Pareto distribution of defects in code**. The strongest concentration of defects on a small part of a system's code size is reported in [OW02]. 10% of the files that account for a range of 68% - 100% of defects (depending on the analysed release) contain about 35% of the system's code. But the percentage of the code contained in the most fault-prone files always exceeded the percentage of the files that contained the defects. The results reported in [FO00], [AR07], and [KK96] do not provide evidence for the Pareto distribution of defects in code as well. This is the case for both pre-release and post-release defects as reported in [AR07]. The only study analysing the Pareto distribution of defects in code across several releases is reported in [OW02]. In contrast to a decreasing concentration of defects on a small part of files from release to release, the corresponding percentage of code (contained in those fault-prone files) does not show such a trend. 10% of the most fault-prone files that account for the most of the system's defects make up about 35% of the code mass. This result is similar to the results obtained by analysing the Pareto distribution in code for OSPs reported in this paper.

6 Summary and Conclusions

In this paper, we presented the results of an empirical study on the distribution of defects in software. To our knowledge, this is the first study that analyses the Pareto Principle for open source projects. Additionally, in contrast to other studies considering a small number of commercial systems, we analysed the fault distribution in a wide range of open source projects across several releases.

Two of our initial hypotheses could be confirmed: A small number of files accounts for the majority of the defects (*Hypothesis 1*). This is true even across several releases of software (*Hypothesis 2*). The results widely correspond to the findings reported in literature for commercial systems. Only one study reports the results of the analysis of several consecutive releases of a software system [OW02]. The results of our study and the results reported in [OW02] have commonalities and differences. Both studies support the hypothesis that the concentration of defects on a small part of files persists across several releases of software. In contrast to our results, Ostrand and Weyuker report that the concentration even increases, i.e. the defects concentrate on a lower percentage of files as system matures. For OSPs, the concentration varies slightly from release to release. This observation can have several reasons: First, OSPs do not mature, as this is the case for commercial software; they rather settle down to a relative stable level. Another reason could be that the authors in [OW02] consider thirteen releases of a software system. The number of releases considered in this study is lower.

Similarly to the results reported in literature, we did not find evidence for our initial hypotheses concerning the distribution of defects in code (*Hypothesis 3*). Defects do not

concentrate on a small part of the code. In some projects, this has been true for a small part of the analysed releases. Thus, we analysed whether in these cases the concentration persists across several releases (*Hypothesis 4*). However, this was not the case. A high concentration of defects on a small part of a system's code is an exception. In addition, there is no evidence for the converse hypothesis: If a small number of files account for the majority of the defects, it is because these files contain the majority of the code.

The results of this study can be used by practitioners and researchers as well. Knowing about the existence of a Pareto distribution of defects on files, testers can focus their testing activities on these very files only, concentrating their limited resources on the "vital few" instead of the "trivial many". From the research point of view, this study increases the empirical body of knowledge. Replication of studies is advocated in order to gain confidence in the results instead of relying on single studies with specific context [Pf05].

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