The 2017 Survey of Optometric Practice was conducted by the American Optometric Association (AOA) Research and Information Center between April and July 2018. The survey collected information about private and corporate practice, and other practice types in which optometrists practiced during 2016. Respondents answered questions using information from the previous year of operation, not 2017. The 2017 Survey was sent to a random stratified sample of professionally active optometrists who had a valid address on file with the AOA or the state boards of optometry.

Practicing Optometrists and their Patients is derived from the 2017 Survey of Optometric Practice, the intent of which is to gather key information about optometric practice characteristics, such as number and frequency of patient visits, hours worked by optometrists and optometric staff, as well as gross billings, expenses and income. This report provides descriptive statistics on characteristics of optometrists in the United States, patients of practicing optometrists, and optometrists’ participation in third party plans and managed care services. Data is presented for all optometrists, owner optometrists, solo optometrists and non-solo optometrists, new owners, independent contractors and employed optometrists. The Executive Summary aims to provide an overview of survey results.

RESPONDING OPTOMETRISTS

Forty-eight percent of respondents to the 2017 Survey were owner optometrists. Of these, 58% were solo owners; 42% were non-solo owners in group practices. Non-owner optometrists accounted for 52% of respondents. Of these, 84% were employed optometrists; 16% were independent contractors/lessees.

Three out of five optometrists (58%) indicated their primary practice was a private practice; 23% were in corporate practices. Forty-four percent of private practice respondents were solo owners. Non-owner optometrists comprised the majority (90%) in corporate practices. Fifty-eight percent of responding optometrists in corporate practices were employees, while 32% were independent contractors.

Among all responding optometrists, 97% said their primary practice type was their only practice in 2016. Of those who reported a secondary occupation, 53% were self-employed in their secondary practice and 47% were employees. Fifty-one percent of responding AOA member optometrists were an owner of a practice compared to 44% of non-AOA member optometrists.
OPTOMETRIST CHARACTERISTICS

GENDER

The majority of responding owner optometrists were male. Male optometrists accounted for 61% of owner optometrists in all practice types; female optometrists made up 39%. Female optometrists comprised the majority of new owner respondents at 66%. Men comprised the majority of responding non-owner optometrists (53%) across all practice types; women made up 47%. Female optometrists again made up the majority (62%) of new non-owner optometrists.

AGE

The majority of all responding optometrists (71%) were age 40 or older; 29% were under the age of 40. Of owner optometrists, the average age reported was 51 and new owner optometrists averaged 34 years of age. Non-owners averaged 46 years of age.

YEARS IN PRACTICE

Twenty-five percent of all responding optometrists have been in practice for 10 years or less, and 57% of these respondents were AOA members. Twenty-seven percent of all responding optometrists have been in practice for more than 30 years; 62% of these optometrists were AOA members. Of owner optometrists, 56% have been in practice for more than 20 years; 19% of owners have been in practice for 10 years or less. Of non-owner optometrists, 32% have been in practice for 10 years or less. Forty-two percent of non-owner optometrists have been in practice for more than 20 years.

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PRACTICE CHARACTERISTICS

Responding owner optometrists reported an average of 2.4 optometrists and 6.9 optometric staff in 2016. Non-owner optometrists averaged 5.4 optometrists in the practice and 13.2 optometric staff.

The average office space size for all owner optometrists was 3,161.7 square feet of office space with 3.9 exam rooms. Non-owner optometrists in private practice reported an average office space size in 2016 of 3,694.4 square feet with 3.9 exam rooms. Non-owners in corporate practice reported an average office space of 3,029.8 square feet and 5.9 exam rooms.

Owner optometrists responding to the 2017 Survey reported an average of 39.5 hours spent in the office per week. The majority of that time (86%) was spent treating patients. Non-owner optometrists reported an average of 39.3 hours spent in the office per week, with 89% of that time spent treating patients.

PATIENT CHARACTERISTICS

AGE & GENDER

Patients between the ages of 35-54 made up the majority (23%) of patients seen by owner optometrists in 2016. The majority of patients (22%) seen by non-owner optometrists were over the age of 65. More than half of all patients seen by responding owner optometrists were female (54%), and female patients also accounted for the majority of patients seen by non-owner optometrists (51%).
PATIENT CHARACTERISTICS

PATIENT VISITS

Owner optometrists reported a total of 2,530 patient visits per individual optometrist within the practice in 2016. Owner optometrists averaged a total of 52.4 visits per week, including 12.2 new patient visits and 5.0 walk-in/emergency visits. Non-owner optometrists reported seeing the largest number of patients in their primary practice with 3,596 visits per individual optometrist within the practice over the course of 2016. Non-owner optometrists reported an average of 74.9 total visits per week with 20.8 new patient visits and 7.7 walk-in/emergency visits per week.

INSURANCE

Responding owner optometrists reported that 60% of their patients were covered by vision insurance or a private insurance plan; 16% of patients were not covered at all. Of those patients covered by insurance, 24% were covered under Vision Service Plan (VSP) insurance. Non-owner optometrists reported only 11% of patients were covered under VSP, and 38% were covered under a public assistance program.

THIRD PARTY PAYER AND MANAGED CARE SERVICES

On average in 2016, owner optometrists accepted a reduced examination fee for 64% of their patients; owner optometrists also reported accepting reduced fees for 56% of patients requiring frames and lenses and 44% of patients needing contact lens services. Non-owners reported accepting reduced examination fees for 33% of their patients. Non-owners, on average, accepted reduced fees for 22% of patients requiring frames and lenses and 11% of patients requiring contact lens services.
THIRD PARTY PAYER AND MANAGED CARE SERVICES

Nearly all responding optometrists provided comprehensive eye exams for health maintenance organizations (HMOs) and preferred provider organizations (PPOs) in 2016; this includes owner optometrists (95%) and non-owner optometrists (100%). More than two out of five owner optometrists (43%) participated in medical insurance plans; 44% participated in vision insurance plans. Owner optometrists reported participation in an average of 4.7 medical and 3.3 vision insurance plans. One out of three non-owner optometrists (33%) reported participating in medical insurance plans, and 29% participated in vision insurance plans. Responding non-owner optometrists participated in an average of 4.0 medical insurance plans and 2.8 vision insurance plans.

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<th>Owner Optometrists</th>
<th>Non-Owner Optometrists</th>
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<td>43% participated in medical plans</td>
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<td>44% participated in vision plans</td>
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RETIREMENT

Beginning with the 2014 Survey of Optometric Practice, the AOA began asking survey respondents about retirement, specifically the expected age of retirement, plans to reduce patient care hours prior to full retirement, an approximate age at which reduction in patient care hours is expected, and key factors influencing their retirement age decisions. Among all survey respondents, 70% indicated a planned age at which they intend to fully retire, and the average age of expected retirement was 66.5 years. Forty-two percent of responding optometrists reported that they plan to significantly reduce patient care hours prior to full retirement. Of these, 69% provided an average expected age of 60.0 at which they will reduce their patient care hours. On average, female optometrists reported a lower age of 60.4 years at which they planned to reduce patient care hours. Male optometrists reported a planned age of 62.3 years at which they would reduce patient care hours. When asked about key factors influencing their retirement age decisions, the majority of responding optometrists reported that financial reasons/eligibility for retirement benefits was most influential. This was the dominant factor across all segments, including membership, gender, age groups, and census region.

About the 2017 Survey of Optometric Practice:

The 2017 Survey of Optometric Practice was conducted by the American Optometric Association (AOA) Research and Information Center between April and July 2018. Results from the survey are being released in three volumes: 1) Income from Optometry, 2) Employment of Optometric Staff, and 3) Practicing Optometrists and their Patients.

The Practicing Optometrists and their Patients Report focuses on optometrist and practice characteristics and descriptive statistics on patients of practicing optometrists.

Several limitations of this study should be noted: (1) optometrists were invited to complete a paper survey which was distributed by the U.S. Postal Service. Incorrect addresses or delays in delivering the survey instrument may have excluded doctors from participating in, or receiving, the survey. (2) Optometrists who chose to participate in this survey were self-selected, which may mean that the survey attracted responses from optometrists whose practices were doing exceptionally well.

For questions about this survey, or other surveys conducted by the AOA, please contact the Research & Information Center at: ric@aoa.org. To purchase a copy of the full report, please visit the AOA Marketplace at: store.aoa.org.