**Practicing Optometrists and their Patients**

**Purpose**

*Practicing Optometrists and their Patients* is derived from the 2012 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**

Non-owner optometrists accounted for 51% of respondents to the 2012 Survey. Non-owners include employed optometrists and independent contractors/lessees. The remaining 49% of respondents were owners. Of these owners, 48% were solo owners and 52% owned all or a portion of a group practice.

Nearly three out of five optometrists (57%) indicated their primary practice was a private practice, and 24% were in corporate practices. Of these private practices, 79% were owners. In corporate practices, non-owner optometrists comprised the majority with 70%.

Optometrists employed by non-optometrist healthcare providers comprised more than two thirds (68%) of respondents in other practice types.

Among all responding optometrists, 68% indicated their primary practice was their only practice in 2011. Among those who reported a secondary occupation, 21% were self-employed in their secondary practice and 11% were an employee. Nearly one fifth (19%) of responding optometrists have been in practice for more than 30 years, and 34% have been in practice less than 10 years.

More than half (56%) of responding AOA member optometrists were an owner of a practice compared to 40% of non-AOA member optometrists.

**Optometrist Characteristics**

Among all responding optometrists, 61% were male, as seen in Figure 1. The majority of owner optometrists (74%) were male. Male optometrists accounted for 59% of new owner optometrists (those who graduated from optometry within the last 10 years) and 73% of non-solo owner optometrists. Female optometrists comprised the majority (51%) for non-owners and new non-owner optometrists (58%).

The average age for all optometrists in 2011 was 46 years. The average age for owner optometrists and non-solo owner optometrists was 50 years. New owner optometrists averaged 35 years of age, and non-owners averaged 42 years of age. One third of all optometrists have been in practice for 10 years or less. Eleven percent of non-owner optometrists have been in practice for more than 30 years, and 48% have been in practice for less than 10 years. Over half of owner optometrists (56%) have been in practice for more than 20 years. Only 20% of owners have been in practice for 10 years or less.
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Practice Characteristics

Nearly a third of all owner optometrists (30%) were located in the South region of the United States, followed by the West with 29%. Only 16% of owner respondents were located in the Northeast region. Among non-owner optometrists, 33% were located in the Midwest. Solo owner optometrists averaged four optometric staff in 2011. Non-solo owner optometrists averaged three optometrists in the practice and eight optometric staff. Non-owner optometrists averaged 10 optometrists in the practice and 11 optometric staff, as seen in Figure 2. The average practice size for all responding optometrists was 5 exam rooms and 3,765 square feet of office space. Non-owner optometrists reported the largest practices with an average of 5,370 square feet and seven exam rooms, as displayed in Figure 3. New owner optometrists averaged three exam rooms and 2,034 square feet of office space. The average for all owner optometrists was three exam rooms and 2,528 square feet of office space. Optometrists responding to the 2012 Survey reported an average of 37 hours spent in the office per week.

Patient Characteristics

The majority age group (24%) of patients seen by all responding optometrists was 35 to 54 years. Solo owner optometrists reported 17% of their patients were over 65 years, and non-owners reported 21% of patients seen were over 65 years. Over half of owners (56%) and non-owners (51%) reported their patients were female. Responding optometrists reported that one fifth (19%) of patients were covered under Vision Service Plan (VSP) insurance, as displayed in Figure 4. One fifth (20%) were not covered by any insurance and 24% were covered under a public assistance program. Non-owner optometrists reported only 11% of patients were covered under VSP, and 30% were covered under a public assistance program.

Number of Patients

Non-owner optometrists reported the largest number of active patients for their primary practice, with 17,921 patients. Solo owner optometrists reported an average of 6,261 active patients and non-solo owner optometrists reported an average of 12,270 active patients. The overall average number of patients treated per week was 60. Owner optometrists averaged a total of 57 patients treated per week. This includes seven walk-in/emergency visits and 16 new patient visits. Non-owner optometrists reported an average of 63 total patients treated per week. Non-owners reported 20 new patient visits and nine walk-in/emergency visits per week.
Third Party Payer and Managed Care Services

Almost all owner optometrists (96%) provided comprehensive eye exams for health maintenance organizations (HMOs) and preferred provider organizations (PPOs). A slightly lower number of independent contractor/lessees (91%) provided comprehensive eye exams. More than three fourths of owner optometrists (79%) provided treatment of glaucoma for HMOs and PPOs but only one third (33%) of independent contractors/lessees provided such care.

Nearly all owner optometrists participated in medical insurance plans (90%) and vision insurance plans (96%). Among independent contractor/lessees, 86% participated in medical insurance plans and 95% participated in vision insurance plans. Owner optometrists reported participation in an average of nine medical and eight vision insurance plans. Independent contractor/lessees participated in six medical and 10 vision insurance plans.

On average in 2011, owner optometrists accepted a reduced examination fee for 61% of their patients, and 39% for contact lens services. Independent contractor/lessees accepted reduced examination fees for 43% of their patients, and reduced contact lens service fees for 18% of their patients.

Figure 5: Average Number of Insurance Plans
Optometrists Participated in by U.S. Census Region, 2011.

About the 2012 Survey of Optometric Practice

The 2012 Survey of Optometric Practice was conducted by the American Optometric Association (AOA) Research and Information Center in April 2012. The survey collected information about private and corporate practice, and other practice types in which optometrists practice during 2011. Respondents answered questions using information from the previous year of operation, not 2012. The 2012 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.

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.

This report summarizes optometrist characteristics, patient characteristics, and participation in third party payer and managed care services. Reports available from Practicing Optometrists and their Patients include a Detailed Analysis Report and an Optometry Report. The Detailed Analysis Report uses limited narrative with cross tabulation for further analysis. The Optometry Report is in narrative format. Reports may be purchased by contacting the AOA Order Department or by visiting the web site at: www.aoa.org/store.

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