



# Retrospective Demographic Analysis of Patients Seeking Care at a Free University Chiropractic Clinic

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## Abstract

**Objective:** The purpose of this study was to describe the demographics, presenting complaints, and health history of new patients seeking treatment at a free chiropractic clinic within a university health center.

**Methods:** A retrospective analysis of patient files from 2008 to 2009 was performed for a free student chiropractic clinic in the Buffalo, NY, area. Demographics, presenting complaints, and health history of new patients seeking treatment were recorded.

**Results:** There were 343 new chiropractic patient files. Most patients were between the ages of 18 and 30 years ( $n = 304$ , 88%) with an almost equal distribution of men ( $n = 163$ , 48%) and women ( $n = 180$ , 52%). The patients were mostly single ( $n = 300$ , 87%). Patients self-reported that their case histories excluded a current medical diagnosis ( $n = 261$ , 76%), previous history of disease ( $n = 216$ , 63%), allergies ( $n = 240$ , 70%), previous surgical procedures ( $n = 279$ , 81%), and medication use ( $n = 250$ , 73%). The frequencies of spinal complaints were as follows: lumbar spine,  $n = 176$  (51%); cervical spine,  $n = 78$  (23%); and thoracic spine,  $n = 44$  (13%). Maintenance care, headaches, and spine-related upper and lower extremities complaints accounted for the other 13% of patients treated. Half were chronic ( $n = 172$ , 50%), and a third were acute ( $n = 108$ , 31%). Patients averaged 6 chiropractic visits, with 88% having 11 visits or less.

**Conclusion:** This study found that new patients seeking care at a free student chiropractic clinic within a university health center in the Buffalo area mainly consisted of young single adults, with chronic lumbar spine complaints with few comorbidities.

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## Introduction

Cost, lack of insurance, type of insurance, and transportation are types of access barriers for patients seeking chiropractic care.<sup>1</sup> Many studies on demographics and clinical characteristics of chiropractic patients exist in the literature. Research indicates that chiropractic patients in the United States are between 38 and 45 years of age, approximately 60% female, and mostly white and well educated, and between 41% and 68% have low back pain as a chief complaint.<sup>2-5</sup> Practice analyses of the chiropractic profession confirm these data on demographics and clinical characteristics of chiropractic patients.<sup>6-8</sup> The demographics of chiropractic patients in Australia and Europe are similar to those in the United States.<sup>9,10</sup> The literature also describes chiropractic care of children, birth through adolescence,<sup>11-15</sup> and older adults.<sup>16-21</sup>

An understudied population relative to access to chiropractic care and patient characteristics is young adults 18 to 29 years of age. Although this age group accounts for only 16% of office visits in the United States,<sup>6-8</sup> previous research on demographics and patient characteristics of young adults was limited to cases at chiropractic teaching clinics. A large-scale study of a chiropractic teaching clinic indicated that there were 1040 patients (52%) between the ages of 21 and 34 years old.<sup>22</sup> The primary complaint of patients in this study was acute or subacute low back pain, which showed improvement after an average of 4.4 treatment visits.<sup>22</sup> A subsequent study comparing demographics and patient characteristics at 6 chiropractic teaching clinics revealed that mean patient age ranged from 34 to 43 years, with 5 of the 6 clinics having 64% to 77% of their patients in the age of group of less than 40 years.<sup>23</sup> The most frequent primary complaint was low back pain, 21% to 41%, with the majority of these low back pain complaints being chronic in nature, 64% to 80%.<sup>23</sup> A 5-year study of patients treated at the Canadian Memorial Chiropractic College (n = 15,174) indicated that 26.1% were students and that the most frequent site of the chief complaint was cervical spine (32.4%) followed by the lumbar spine (24.4%) for the study sample.<sup>24</sup> The musculoskeletal conditions in the study sample were chronic, subacute, and acute in nature, and the average number of treatment visits was 6.6.<sup>24</sup>

More recent studies on chiropractic teaching clinics reported that 20% to 32% of patient populations were young adults 20 to 39 years of age, with chronic low back pain being the primary complaint reported in these study

samples.<sup>25,26</sup> Most recently, 30% of patients treated at a chiropractic teaching clinic were young adults 18 to 30 years of age, and low back pain (31.3%) was the most frequent chief complaint of all patients treated.<sup>27</sup>

The information gleaned from these studies on young adults is limited because the data were not consistently or specifically described for young adults. Preliminary survey data indicated that acute or subacute low back pain was the primary complaint of young adults 18 to 29 years of age seeking care at a free chiropractic clinic within a university health center.<sup>1</sup> A free student health center provides an opportunity to focus on demographics and patient characteristics of young adults 18 to 29 years of age seeking chiropractic care. Although the free student health center is limited to enrolled university students, this sample of students addresses access barriers of cost and transportation for young adults seeking chiropractic care.<sup>1</sup> This student sample also avoids the bias of young adults being chiropractic students who receive multiple spinal manipulations during their educational training and have no behavioral barriers toward chiropractic care. Contributing information to literature on clinical characteristics of chiropractic patients 18 to 29 years of age will add to our understanding of chiropractic care across the lifespan.

The purpose of this study was to describe the demographics, presenting complaints, and health history of new patients seeking treatment at a free student chiropractic clinic within a university health center.

## Methods

The SUNY Buffalo Health Sciences Institutional Review Board approved this study. All patients signed Health Insurance Portability Accountability Act release forms at their first clinic visit and before receiving chiropractic care. All new chiropractic patient files from January 2008 to December 2009 at a free university chiropractic clinic in Buffalo, NY, were identified for retrospective analysis. Patient files needed to be inactive for a year or more at the time of review to be included in the retrospective analysis. Patients younger than 18 years were excluded from this study because of difficulty in attaining appropriate parental release. Methods for recruitment of new patients included referrals from medical physicians and other health care professionals at the university health center, university health center Web site, posters

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