Background

Being homeless is apart from the lack of housing, related to a number of additional problems such as mental health problems and substance use problems. A recent topic of interest in the field of research on homelessness is the prevalence of intellectual disability (ID). There is a higher prevalence of intellectual disability (ID) among homeless people than in the general population (e.g. 0.7% in the Netherlands). However, little is known about the additional psychosocial problems faced by homeless people with ID. This study aims to (1) describe the prevalence of ID in a cohort of homeless people in the Netherlands; and (2) to report relationships between ID and psychosocial problems in terms of psychological distress, substance (mis)use and dependence, as well as demographic characteristics.

Methods

This cross-sectional study is part of a cohort study among homeless people in the four major cities of the Netherlands. Data were derived from 387 homeless people who were interviewed and screened for ID in between July 2011 and June 2012. Multivariate logistic regression analyses and χ² tests were performed to analyze relationships between ID, psychosocial problems and demographic characteristics.

Results

Of all participants, 29.5% had a suspected ID. Participants with a suspected ID had a higher mean age, were more likely to be male and to fall in the lowest category of education than participants without a suspected ID. Having a suspected ID was related to general psychological distress (OR = 1.56, p < 0.05), somatization (OR = 1.84, p < 0.01), depression (OR = 1.58, p < 0.05) and substance dependence (OR = 1.88, p < 0.05). No relationships were found between a suspected ID and anxiety, regular substance use, substance misuse and primary substance of use.

Conclusions

The prevalence of ID among Dutch homeless people is much higher than that of ID in the general Dutch population. Homeless people with a suspected ID have more psychosocial problems than homeless people without a suspected ID. Therefore, homeless people with a suspected ID are a vulnerable subgroup within the homeless population. This endorses the importance of extra attention in care programmes for this subgroup.

Key messages

- The relatively large number of homeless people with a suspected ID emphasises that expertise in the field of intellectual disability among professionals working in homeless services is required.
- Screening on intellectual disability of homeless people may be an effective method to identify those who are particularly vulnerable in terms of psychosocial problems within a homeless population.