

Abstract

This cross-sectional study examined the prevalence and correlates of mental illness in the homeless population in Hong Kong. Cantonese-speaking Chinese who slept in places not intended to be dwellings for any duration from March to August, 2011 were identified from the records of designated organizations serving homeless people. Ninety-seven subjects were randomly drawn from the records and invited to join the study. The response rate was 69% (n=97, Male = 92.8%). Seventeen subjects could not give a valid consent due to poor mental state and they were excluded from data analysis. Chinese versions of the Structured Clinical Interview for DSM-IV Axis-I disorders (SCID-I) and the Mini-Mental State Examination were administered by a psychiatrist. Diagnosis was generated by SCID-I and consensus diagnosis was made by three independent psychiatric specialists. The point prevalence of mental illness was 56%. Seventy-one percent of the subjects had a lifetime history of mental illness, 30% had mood disorders, 25% had alcohol use disorders, 25% had substance use disorders, 11% had psychotic disorders, 10% had anxiety disorders and 6% had dementia. Thirty-eight percent of the mentally ill had previous psychiatric assessment. Only 18% of the mentally ill were receiving psychiatric care at the time of interview. The rates of under-treatment and prevalence of mental illness were underestimated, since a significant proportion of the chosen subjects were too ill to give a valid consent to join the study. Despite the high prevalence of mental illness, under-treatment was common. Further studies to investigate the barriers of access to mental health service for the homeless are necessary. The collaboration of community psychiatrists and service providers for the homeless will provide more effective treatment for the mentally ill homeless individuals.

Keywords: homeless, mental illness, prevalence, Hong Kong