Introduction Health conditions and functionality problems related to ageing affect the ability to live independently, leading to the placement of elders in a long-stay institution. This phenomenon has been increasing in Brazil. This study analyzes functional dependence and its associated factors in this population group.

Methods This is a cross-sectional study with elderly residents of long-stay institutions in four Brazilian cities. The study’s questionnaire included socio-demographic and health-related variables and the assessment of functioning, cognition and mood with scales widely used in elderly populations. The population profile was characterized and the prevalence of dependence in activities of daily life (ADL) and instrumental activities of daily life (IADL) was estimated. Bivariate and multivariate analyses were performed with Poisson regression.

Results These are preliminary results for 340 elders. The mean age was 75.5 years, most were men, 0–4 years of schooling and <5 years of institutionalization. ADL dependency was 40.0% and IADL 58.5%. Female (PR 2.41, 95% CI 1.84 to 3.17), 80 or more years (PR 3.35, 95% CI 1.37 to 8.17), with very poor/poor health (PR 3.28, 95% CI 1.23 to 8.72) and cognitive impairment (PR 2.66, 95% CI 1.19 to 5.95) had high probability of dependence in ADL. Female (PR 3.55, 95% CI 2.31 to 5.45), 80 or more years (PR 5.47, 95% CI 2.26 to 13.25), illiterate (PR 4.89, 95% CI 2.54 to 9.43) and with cognitive impairment (PR 2.55, 95% CI 1.14 to 5.73) had high probability of dependence in IADL.

Conclusions The high prevalence of functional dependence indicates the need for social and healthcare public policies aimed at this specific group in Brazil.