

Anna Bohdan, Bartosz Maziarz, Agnieszka Dornfeld-Kmak

The Safety Standards Protecting Against the COVID-19 Disease in Communal Cultural Institutions in Poland as Exemplified by Selected Communes

Abstract

Objectives: The article aims to present the principles of conducting activities by communal cultural institutions in Poland in the era of the pandemic in the context of actions taken to reduce the risk of virus transmission between unit employees and between the unit employees and people using its services.

Research Design & Methods: The article uses dogmatic-legal analysis and the document analysis method.

Findings: The employed methodology enabled the authors to establish that in communal cultural institutions in Poland measures were taken to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of the spread of the virus.

Implications/Recommendations: According to the authors, the exposure of the measures against preventing the spread of the virus in communal cultural institutions can deepen cooperation between these units in implementing effective measures to counteract the spread of the virus.

Contribution/Value Added: In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic and the dynamically changing health situation in the world, as well as the related lack of up-to-date sources and studies, partial scientific studies demonstrating a selected fragment of reality are critical. In the short and long term, they will enable researchers to learn about the type of actions taken by communal cultural institutions in terms of preventing the spread of the virus.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, communal cultural institutions, safety procedures during the COVID-19 pandemic, public policies.

Article classification: research paper

JEL: H12, H56, H83

Anna Bohdan – Opole University of Technology, Faculty of Economics and Management; e-mail: a.bohdan@po.edu.pl; ORCID: 0000-0001-6946-0812. **Bartosz Maziarz** – the University of Opole, Faculty of Political Science and Communication, Institute of Political Science and Administration; e-mail: bartosz.maziarz@uni.opole.pl; ORCID: 0000-0002-2190-7969. **Agnieszka Dornfeld-Kmak** – WSB University in Wrocław, Faculty of Economics in Opole; e-mail: agnieszka.dornfeld@wsb.wroclaw.pl; ORCID: 0000-0002-3904-2879.

Introduction

On 11th March, 2020, the World Health Organization declared that COVID-19 – a disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus – is a pandemic. Most countries were not prepared to fight and manage the pandemic. They faced the need to develop and implement national solutions responding to the subsequent stages of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic (Gold et al., 2021; Godeau et al., 2021; Sasaki et al., 2020; Guerin et al., 2021). The view that in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, the safety and health of workers should be assigned paramount importance, as they are key elements in achieving desired productivity in workplaces, can be entirely endorsed (Chang et al., 2021; Cunningham et al., 2021). The international doctrine points out that during the initial phase of the pandemic, individual countries' legal systems did not have legal and organisational solutions in place to prevent the spread of the virus and infection among employees in workplaces (Johnson et al., 2022; Berkowitz 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic, therefore, posed unprecedented challenges in ensuring workplace health and safety for employees as well as those who use their services (Dennerlein et al., 2020; Giorgi et al., 2020; Gajewski & Kamiński, 2021). It changed people's lifestyles and the work environment, in particular the functioning of public institutions that are workplaces (Rapisarda et al., 2021; Giusino et al., 2020; Salari et al., 2020; W. Tong, 2021). In practice, this resulted in a number of restrictions on their operations aimed at preventing the spread of the virus. Global and national health authorities issued health and safety recommendations applicable to workplaces (Ingram et al., 2021). Such measures were also introduced in Poland. One of the ways to combat the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus was the introduction of temporary restrictions on the functioning of various institutions at the national, regional, and local levels. These restrictions also covered cultural institutions operating in the basic units of the local government system in Poland, i.e. communes.

Legal basis for safety procedures in communal cultural institutions in the Polish law

The identification, comprehension, and implementation of effective measures to prevent and control SARS-CoV-2 infections in the workplace is crucial to protect employees, their families, and communities (Ingram et al., 2021). Since the outbreak of the pandemic in March 2020, the particular regulations of the Polish law have been continuously adapted to the current pandemic situation. By means of these regulations, the legislator attempts to minimise the impact of the pandemic on employment and the economy, which significantly affects the situation of employers and employees (Rycak, 2020). Employers are faced with the need to plan and organise the work of their employees so that it corresponds to their business models and labour market conditions while simultaneously maintaining maximum health and life protection (Gajewski & Kamiński, 2021).

In the process of establishing safety procedures in communal cultural institutions, the fundamental role should be attributed to the generally applicable law. In the Act of 2nd March, 2020, on specific solutions related to the prevention and combating of COVID-19 and other infectious diseases and crises caused by them (the consolidated text: Journal of Laws of 2021, item 2095), among many regulations of an interdisciplinary nature, there were provisions obliging employers to ensure safe and hygienic conditions for employees at a workplace. Fulfilling this obligation, employers should bear in mind the current knowledge on the prevention of SARS-

CoV-2 infection and, consequently, strictly follow the recommendations of the government and the sanitary inspection authorities (Gajewski & Kamiński, 2021).

In the case of communal cultural institutions, particular importance should also be attributed to Article 46a(1-2) and Article 46b of the Act of 5th December, 2008, on preventing and combating infections and infectious diseases in humans (the consolidated text: Journal of Laws of 2021, item 2069). They constitute the basis for the Council of Ministers to determine, by way of a regulation, the area at risk, and indicate the type of a zone where the state of an epidemic or the state of an epidemic risk has occurred, as well as the type of applicable solutions. Using the prerogative enacted on 31st March, 2020, the Council of Ministers issued the first regulation on the establishment of certain restrictions, orders, and prohibitions in connection with the occurrence of the state of an epidemic (Journal of Laws of 2020, item 566). Along with the development of the epidemic situation, this regulation was repealed on a regular basis and replaced with subsequent regulations taking into account the development of the epidemic. The currently applicable regulation of the Council of Ministers of 6th May, 2021, on establishing certain restrictions, orders, and prohibitions in connection with the occurrence of an epidemic (Journal of Laws of 2021, item 861, hereinafter: the 2021 CM Regulation) maintains the obligation to take measures in communal cultural institutions to introduce appropriate work organisation resulting in limiting personal contacts among institutions' employees as well as between employees and customers. In communal cultural institutions, therefore, it is necessary to take measures on an ongoing basis aimed at introducing an appropriate sanitary regime resulting in ensuring the organisation of work and an institution's functioning in conditions of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. Pursuant to the provisions of the Regulation of the CM of 29th May, 2021, culture houses and centres, as well as, consequently, communal cultural institutions regained the possibility of conducting their activities indoors, subject to the fulfilment of three basic conditions: limiting the number of participants to no more than 15 people, maintaining a distance of 1.5 m between participants, and ensuring that participants observe the order to cover their mouths and noses. An absolute prohibition on the consumption of drinks and meals on the premises of cultural institutions was also introduced (Article 9(22) of the 2021 CM Regulation). The employer was obliged to provide persons employed in communal cultural institutions, regardless of the basis of employment, with disposable gloves or hand disinfectants and to ensure appropriate work organisation in the form of introducing a distance between workstations of at least 1.5 m, unless this was not possible due to the nature of the activities carried out in the workplace, and personal protective equipment related to epidemic control was to be provided to all employees (Article 10(3.3) of the 2021 CM Regulation). In addition, it was mandatory to cover the mouth and nose in the workplace if there were at least 2 persons in the room, unless the employer decided otherwise (Article 25(1.2c.) of the 2021 CM Regulation). There was also an absolute obligation for persons providing direct services to the public/users of a communal cultural institution to cover their mouths and noses while being in direct personal contact with the public/users (Article 25(4.17) of the 2021 CM Regulation).

In addition to the provisions of the normative acts, safety procedures adopted in communal cultural institutions should also take into account the regulations specific for this sphere. These include "The Guidelines for the Functioning of Culture Houses and Centres" applicable in Poland during the COVID-19 pandemic, published on the website of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage (The Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, The Guidelines for the Functioning of Culture Houses and Centres, hereinafter: The Guidelines of the Ministry of Culture and National

Heritage). They constitute a set of good practices and guidelines for managers, employees, co-workers, volunteers, and organisers of cultural houses and centres, the implementation of which is guided by three objectives: implementing comprehensive and preventive anti-epidemic measures adjusted to the current epidemiological situation and governmental regulations and guidelines; minimising the risk of spreading the virus in connection with the operation of cultural houses and centres; and ensuring the safety of employees and co-workers of cultural houses and centres as well as the public (The Guidelines of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage). The provisions of the Guidelines covering two particular areas are of primary importance: ensuring safety of employees and co-workers and ensuring safety in a cultural institution (ensuring safety in a facility). They aim at maintaining an appropriate sanitary regime within a given institution.

Measures aimed at ensuring the safety of employees and co-workers should include primarily two categories of measures: measures related to the reorganisation of the work system in the institution and measures of a sanitary nature. Other diversified measures should also be taken to reduce the risk of the virus spreading all over the premises of an institution. The measures aimed at ensuring safety within the first area are presented in Figure 1.

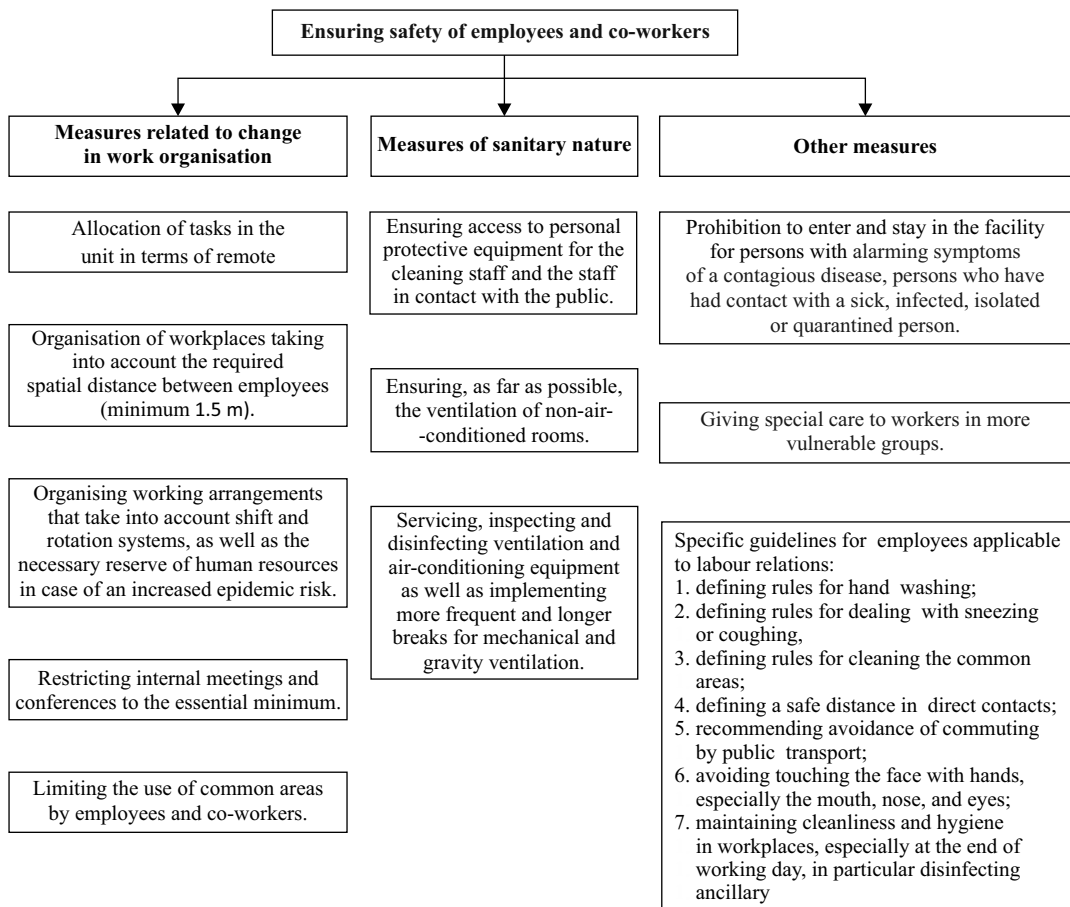


Figure 1. The safety measures aimed at ensuring the safety of employees and co-workers

Source: Own elaboration.

The second area related to ensuring safety in cultural institutions should focus on three types of measures: measures of an informative nature, measures of a sanitary nature, and measures related to restricting the use of the services and assets of an institution. The safety measures within the second area are shown in Figure 2.

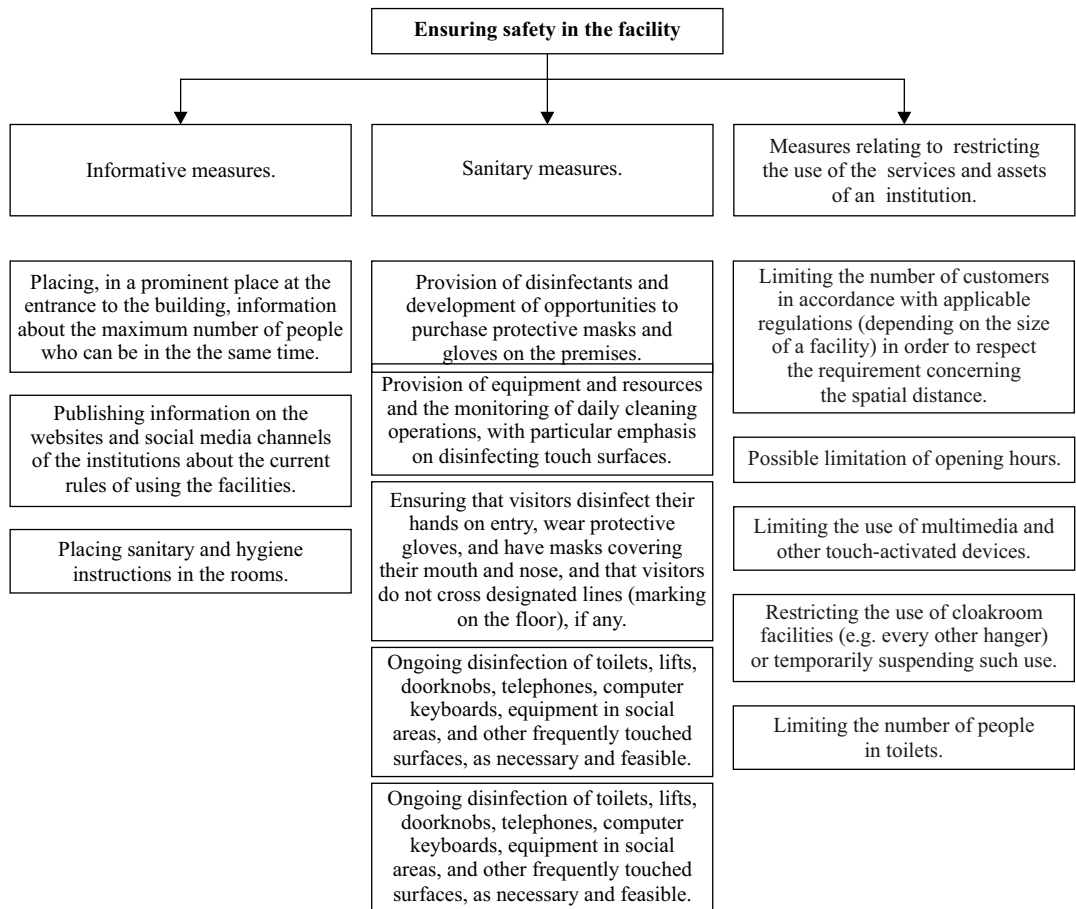


Figure 2. The safety measures aimed at ensuring safety in the facility

Source: Own elaboration.

The safety standards protecting against the COVID-19 disease in communal cultural institutions as exemplified by selected communes

Research methodology

The complete “freezing” of the activities of communal cultural institutions was followed by a process of their “partial unfreezing”. In order to facilitate the gradual and limited restoration of these institutions’ activities, safety standards for their operation under the sanitary regime were defined. Safety procedures during the COVID-19 pandemic were enacted. In the research part of this paper, twenty safety procedures applicable in randomly selected communal cultural institutions

were analysed. These included the procedures applicable in the Cultural Centre in Bełchatów, the Communal Cultural House in Bielsko-Biała, the Cultural Centre in Błonie, the Communal Cultural Centre in Chojnice, the Communal Cultural Centre in Działdów, the Communal Cultural and Sports Centre in Kleszczewo, the Cultural Centre in Kozienice, the Youth Cultural Centre in Legnica, the Cultural Centre in Nowa Huta, the Cultural Centre in Nowe Brzesko, the Cultural Centre in Pleśna, the Cultural Centre in Polkowice, the Cultural Centre in Słomniki, the Youth Cultural Centre in Słupsk, the Cultural and Film Centre in Sucha Beskidzka, the Cultural Centre in Sułoszowa, the Cultural Centre in Wadowice, the Cultural House in Żary, the Cultural House in Rzeszów, and the Youth Cultural Centre in Kraków.

For the purpose of the research, three factors affecting the risk of SARS-CoV-2 infection in communal cultural institutions were distinguished. It was assumed that the probability of infection was increased by:

1. Contacts of a social nature in the internal and external sphere of an institution's functioning, i.e. contacts occurring among an institution's employees as well as between its employees and customers;
2. The shared use of pedestrian traffic routes, sanitary facilities, and common rooms;
3. The shared use of assets used in the daily operation of an institution.

Subsequently, taking into account the provisions of the Guidelines of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, for each of the factors, safety standards were formulated the implementation of which in an institution significantly reduced the risk of SARS-CoV-2 infection on its premises. With regard to the first factor, three types of standards were defined, depending on the category of entities to which they applied:

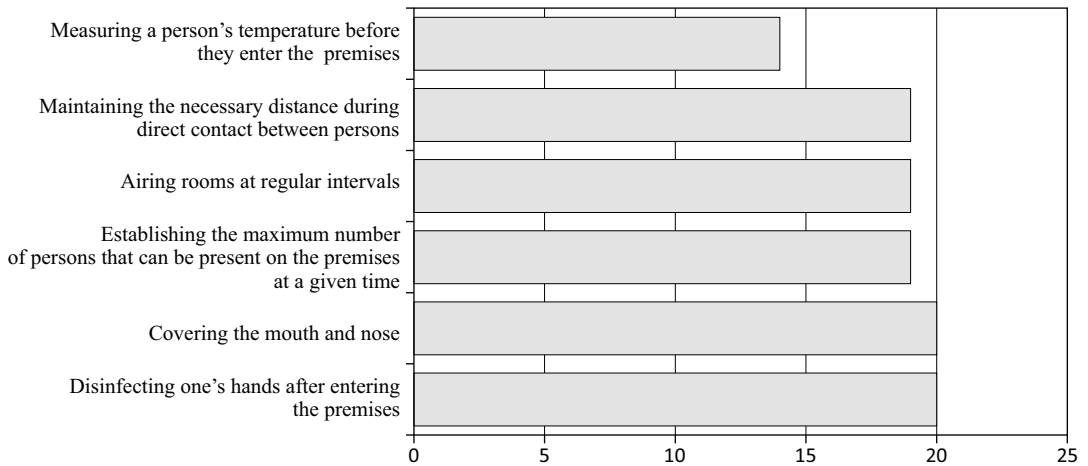
1. Common standards applicable to persons from the internal and external spheres of an institution's operation, i.e. standards aimed at ensuring the safety of both employees and persons using an institution's services;
2. Standards applicable only to persons using the services of an institution, e.g. children/parents, i.e. standards intended to ensure the safety of persons using the services of an institution;
3. Standards applicable only to the personnel of an institution, i.e. standards intended to ensure the safety of its personnel.

The second and third factors are universal factors applicable to all users of an institution, i.e. both its employees and people using its services. Therefore, unlike in the case of the first factor, individual categories of standards were not distinguished.

The research aimed at answering the question whether the measures taken in communal cultural institutions and related to ensuring safety in response to the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus took into account the indicated factors increasing the probability of contracting the virus on an institution's premises. If so, what was the nature of such measures? Was their character comprehensive or limited to selected factors?

The applicable safety standards aimed at protection against the COVID-19 disease in communal cultural institutions as exemplified by selected communes

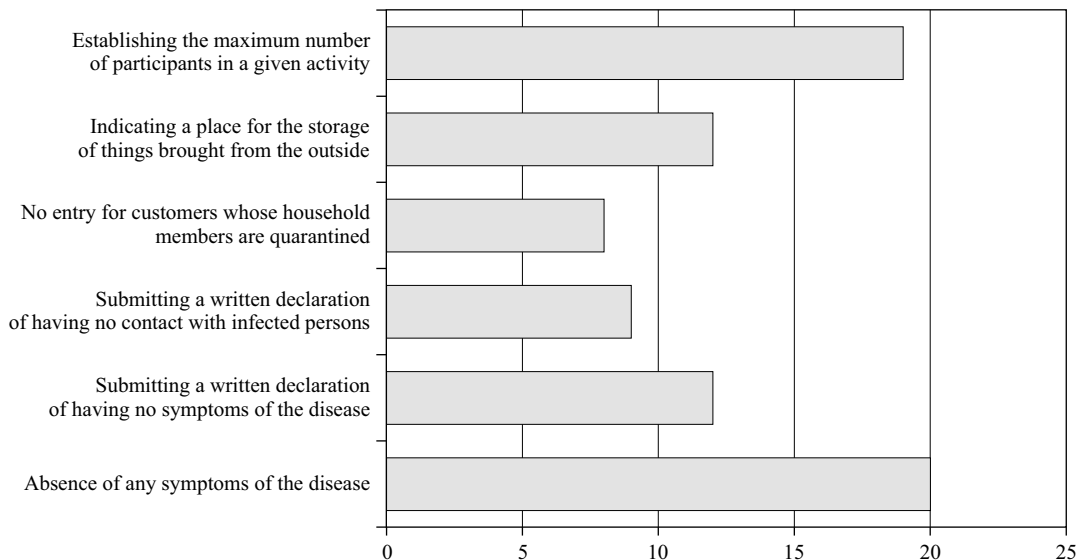
Factor 1. Contacts of a social nature in the internal and external sphere of an institution's functioning, i.e. contacts occurring among an institution's employees as well as between its employees and customers



Graph 1. The general standards common for both an institution's employees and customers

Source: The authors' own work based on the conducted empirical research.

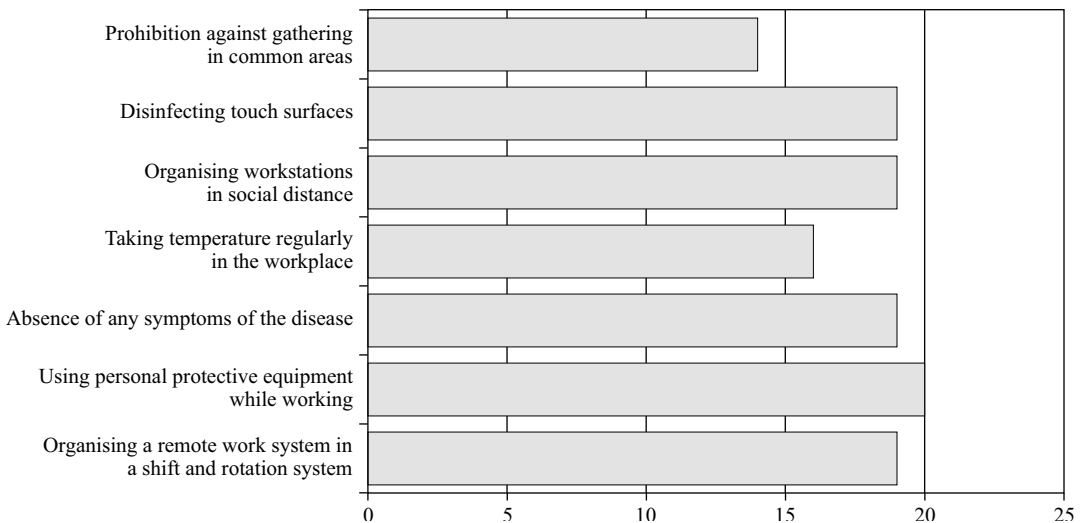
In order to ensure the safety of employees, co-workers, and customers using an institution's services, two obligations were considered to be of primary importance: the obligation to use a face shield inside a building and the obligation to disinfect one's hands after entering an institution's premises. These obligations were introduced in all the analysed procedures. In nineteen institutions, occupancy limits were introduced, together with the obligation to ventilate rooms regularly and to keep a certain social distance in direct contacts. In fourteen cases, mandatory body temperature measurements were introduced for persons entering a building.



Graph 2. The standards applicable only to an institution's customers

Source: The authors' own work based on the conducted empirical research.

In all the institutions, it was decided that only persons without symptoms indicative of upper respiratory tract infections could stay on their premises, and in twelve of them it was required to submit a written declaration of the absence of the disease symptoms, while nine institutions demanded their customers to provide a declaration of having had no contact with an infected person. Nineteen institutions established a limit on the number of people participating in particular cultural activities. In every second institution, people whose household members were under quarantine were not allowed to take part in any activities. Twelve institutions allowed their customers to leave their things brought from the outside in one designated place.



Graph 3. The standards applicable only to an institution's personnel

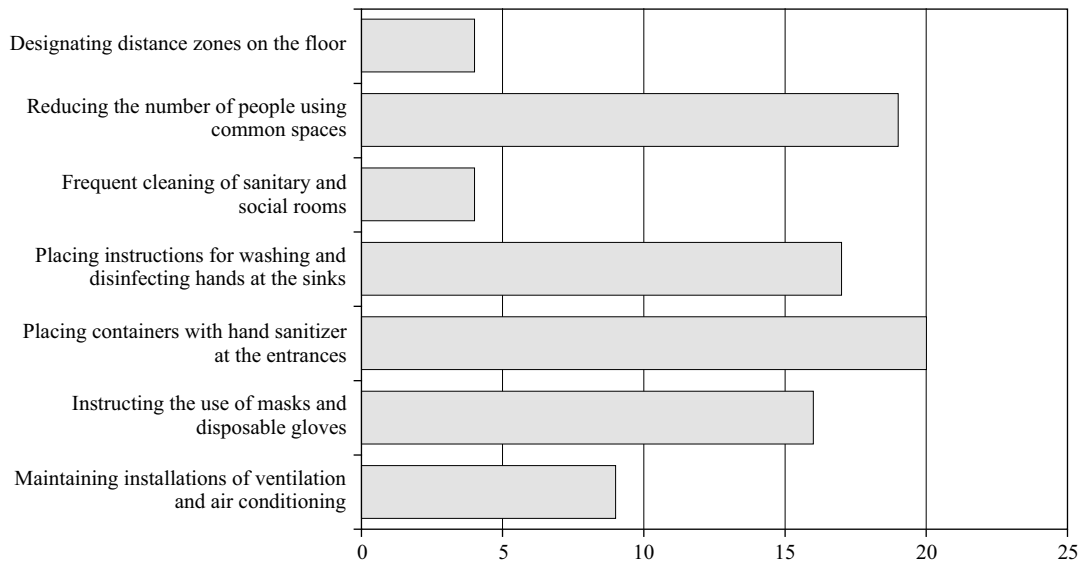
Source: The authors' own work based on the conducted empirical research.

The commonly accepted obligation to use personal protective equipment served, above all, to minimise the risk of infection transmission among employees. In everyday work, particular importance was attributed to the social distancing of employees manifested in maintaining a safe distance between workstations and reorganising the system to facilitate work on a remote or rotational basis. The need for regular disinfection of frequently used surfaces and the absence of the symptoms of the disease in employees were also considered important. Sixteen institutions provided for regular measurements of body temperature during work, and in fourteen of them, rules for the use of common areas were defined by prohibiting people from gathering.

Factor 2. *The shared use of pedestrian traffic routes, sanitary facilities and common rooms*

In all institutions, dispensers with hand disinfectants were widely available and placed at entrances to rooms; in seventeen of them, there was an obligation to place instructions for washing and disinfecting hands at washbasins. The number of people allowed to use common areas was also limited. As the SARS-CoV-2 virus may be present on surfaces, frequent cleaning of sanitary and social areas was considered an important standard. Sixteen institutions defined rules for the use of personal protective equipment by specifying the rules for the correct putting on and putting off of disposable gloves and protective masks. Nine institutions paid particular attention

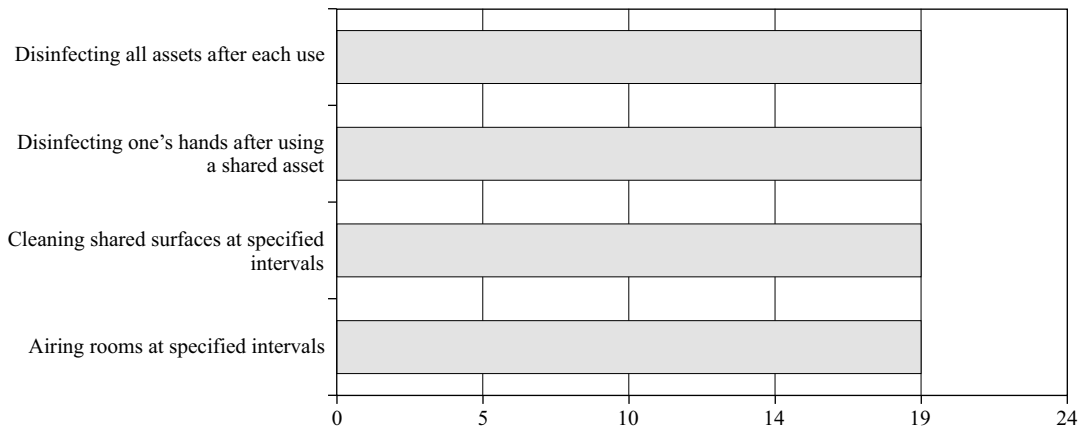
to air supply and exhaust systems and introduced an obligation to conduct periodical servicing and inspections of ventilation and air conditioning systems. One in four institutions marked out special zones in their common areas to ensure the maintenance of a proper social distance.



Graph 4. The shared use of pedestrian traffic routes, sanitary facilities and common rooms

Source: The authors' own work based on the conducted empirical research.

Factor 3. The shared use of assets used in the daily operation of an institution



Graph 5. The shared use of an institution's assets

Source: The authors' own work based on the conducted empirical research.

The regular cleaning and disinfection of both common areas and objects used by employees and customers became a standard. Room ventilation at regular intervals and hand disinfection before and after using common facilities became a norm.

Conclusion

The conducted analysis of the procedural solutions adopted by communal cultural institutions makes it possible to state that they implemented measures intended to ensure safety in the context of the spreading of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. The procedures introduced by the managing bodies of cultural institutions included safety standards for all three factors identified for the purposes of the research and increasing the probability of a SARS-CoV-2 infection. As far as universal standards are concerned, hand disinfection upon entering an institution's premises was introduced along with the obligation to cover one's mouth and nose and maintain social distance. Activity participation limits were lowered and particular emphasis was placed on adequate ventilation of indoor premises. The presence of persons with symptoms indicating an infection was considered a potential threat to the continuity of work of an institution. In all selected establishments, persons with symptoms indicating an upper respiratory tract infection (cough, fever) were prohibited from using their services. It was also considered necessary to establish limits on the number of persons participating in particular activities. Numerous measures were adopted to reduce the risk of spreading the disease in a workplace. Within the framework of the standards adopted for employees working in an institution, apart from the obligation to use personal protective equipment, social distancing was considered to be of primary importance. The principle of distancing was translated primarily into the rules of using common areas, maintaining an appropriate distance between workstations, and introducing changes in the work system by defining groups of employees allowed to work on a remote or rotational basis.

Numerous standards related to the joint use of pedestrian traffic routes, sanitary facilities, and common rooms were also introduced in communal cultural institutions. Above all, a wide availability of disinfectants was ensured and it was recommended to maintain social distance when using common areas. Effective hand disinfection instructions were widely available and posted in prominent places. The number of people using common areas at one time was limited in all institutions. The personnel carrying out daily housekeeping work were obliged to maintain the cleanliness of passageways, in particular to disinfect such surfaces as handrails, handles, and light switches.

With respect to the joint use of an institution's assets in its daily operations, the existing cleaning rules were revised in all institutions with a view to introducing the principles of effective disinfection into the cleaning and maintenance process.

In conclusion, it should be pointed out that the main objective of implementing the aforementioned procedures was, and still is, to prevent the spread of the disease in a manner adjusted to the current epidemiological situation as well as the government's regulations and guidelines. These procedures are also aimed at ensuring the safety of employees and co-workers of communal cultural institutions, as well as customers using their services. They contribute significantly to minimising the risk of spreading the virus in consequence of the activities conducted by communal cultural institutions. They make it possible for people to participate safely in cultural activities and events organised by these establishments.

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Research Ethics Committee

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Conflicts of Interest

The author/authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Data Availability Statement

All data will be available and shared upon request.