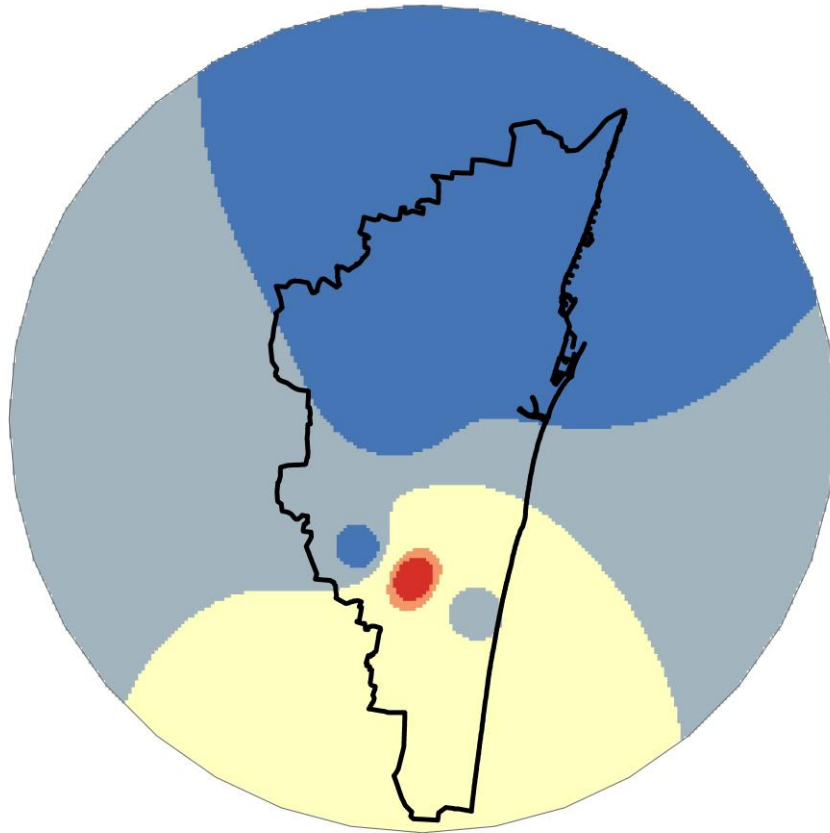




Air Quality Tracker **Ground-level Ozone**



Chennai **Metropolitan Area**



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Air Quality Tracker
Ground-level Ozone

Chennai
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Overview

Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) has alerted from time to time about the growing problem of ground-level ozone in Indian cities. While policy and public attention is nearly fully drawn towards very high level of particulate pollution, the challenge of this highly toxic gas has not attracted adequate policy attention for mitigation and prevention. Inadequate monitoring, limited data and inappropriate methods of trend analysis have weakened the understanding of this growing public health hazard. This requires early action.

The summer of 2024 has witnessed widespread ground-level ozone exceedance making the air of Chennai Metropolitan Area even more toxic. This summer the geographical spread of the problem is not as wide spread as compared to last summer but the toxic built up is lasting longer at locations where it is happening this summer compared to previous summers.

Health evidence is also growing stronger. The 2020 State of Global Air report states that age-standardized rates of death attributable to ground-level ozone is among the highest in India and the seasonal 8-hour daily maximum concentrations have recorded one of the highest increases in India between 2010 and 2017- about 17 per cent. This requires deeper understanding of what is going on in different cities and regions to inform mitigation.

Due to the very toxic nature of ground-level ozone, the national ambient air quality standard for ozone has been set for only short-term exposures (one-hour and eight-hour averages), and compliance is measured by the number of days that exceed the standards. Compliance requires that the standards are met for 98 per cent of the time of the year. It may exceed the limits on two per cent of the days in a year, but not on two consecutive days of monitoring. In other words, there should not be more than eight days in a year when the ozone standard is breached, and none of those allowed exceedances can be on two consecutive days.

The standard practice of Central Pollution Control Board to average out the data of all stations in the city to determine daily AQI does not work for ground-level ozone as it is a short-lived and hyper-localised pollutant. A citywide average concentration level over an extended time frame does not indicate the severity of the problem and health implication from local build up and exposure for people living in hotspots.

Global experience shows that there is usually a trade-off. As particulate pollution is reduced the problem of NO_x and ground-level ozone increase. Globally, regulators are tightening the regulatory benchmark for ozone to address the toxic threat which – given its complex chemistry, is difficult to address. India should prevent this trap.

Why ozone needs special attention? Complex chemistry of ground-level ozone makes it a difficult pollutant to track and mitigate. Ground-level ozone is not directly emitted from any source. It is produced from complex interaction between nitrogen oxides (NO_x) and volatile organic compounds (VOCs) that are emitted from vehicles, power plants, factories, and other combustion sources and undergo cyclic reactions in the presence of sunlight to generate ground-level ozone. VOCs can also be emitted from natural sources, such as plants. Ozone not only builds up in cities but also drifts long distances to form a regional pollutant that makes both local and regional action necessary.

This highly reactive gas has serious health consequences. Those with respiratory conditions, asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and particularly children with premature lungs and older adults are at serious risk. This can inflame and damage airways, make lungs susceptible to infection, aggravate asthma, emphysema, and chronic bronchitis and increase the frequency of asthma attacks leading to increased hospitalisation.

The investigation: This assessment has traced trends in ground-level ozone data from 2020 to 2024. The analysis is based on publicly available granular real time data (15-minute averages) from the CPCB's official online portal Central Control Room for Air Quality Management. The data has been captured from 9 official stations under the Continuous Ambient Air Quality Monitoring System (CAAQMS) spread across Greater Chennai Metropolitan Area.

Given the volatile and highly localized nature of ground-level ozone pollution build-up and its variability across space, and consistent with the global good practice, this analysis has considered station level trends in terms of number of days exceeding the 8-hour standard over time. As ozone formation depends on complex atmospheric chemistry and on photochemical reaction its level varies across time and space horizon. Meteorological parameters such as sunny and warm weather, stagnant wind patterns etc have bearing on its formation. This analysis tracks exceedances at each station in core NCR. Breach of the standard by even one station is considered exceedance by the core NCR. Days with multiple stations exceeding the standard indicates the severity of the spatial spread and number of people exposed. Given that the data is capped at 200 µg/m³ by CPCB, it is not possible to determine how high the concentration really goes.

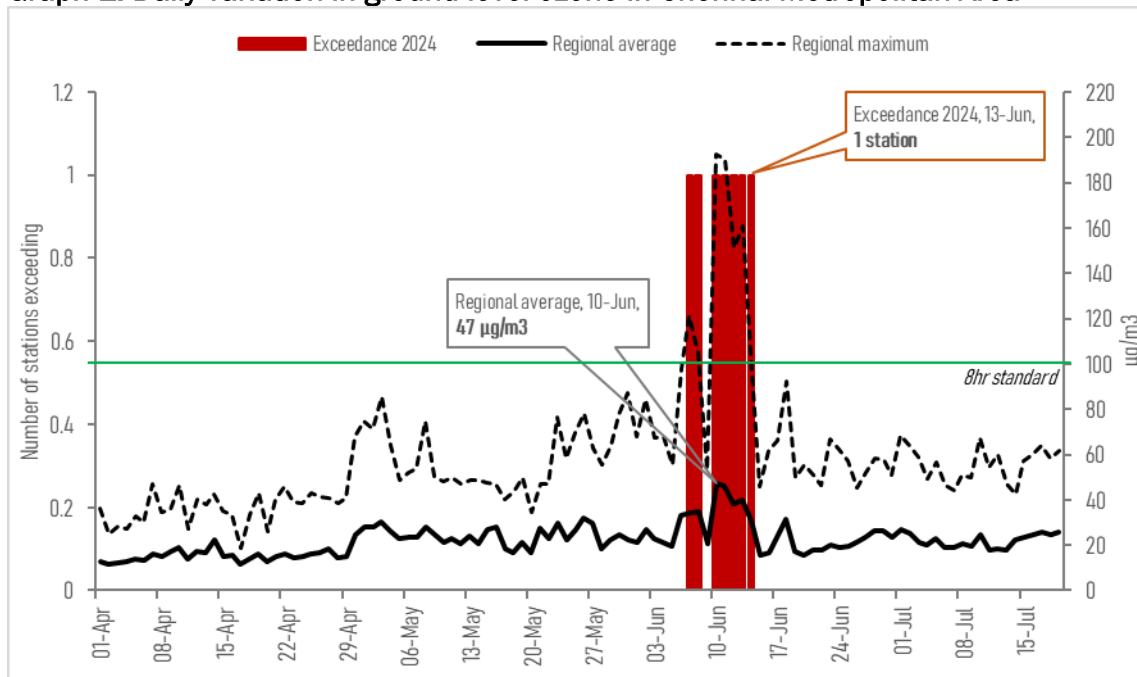
The study has considered global good practice and taken on board the USEPA approach of computing eight-hour averages for a day and then checking for the maximum value among them to capture the daily ozone pollution level. USEPA assesses city-wide or regional AQI based on the highest value recorded among all stations of the city or the region. Thus, trends have been calculated in terms of number of days when the daily level has exceeded the 8-hr standard (referred as exceedance days hereafter).

While analysing the data it has also been noted that the ozone data available on CPCB portal never exceeds 200 µg/m³, while data for the corresponding time on Delhi Pollution Control Committee may show higher levels. Therefore, due to this capping of data it is not possible to understand the nature of peaking in the city. This needs to be addressed as there are two sets of standard for ozone – 8-hourly standard of 100 µg/m³ and one hourly standard at 180 µg/m³. Capping makes assessment of one-hourly standard challenging.

Key findings

Ground-level ozone exceedance is reported on just 7 days of this summer: This summer ground-level ozone exceedances were reported on 7 days between 1 April and 18 July. The worst days of ground ozone pollution are concentrated in the month of June in Chennai Metropolitan Area (See *Graph 1: Daily variation in ground-level ozone exceedance in Chennai Metropolitan Area*). The intensity of pollution was worst on 10 June when the regional average reached $47 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$.

Graph 1: Daily variation in ground-level ozone in Chennai Metropolitan Area

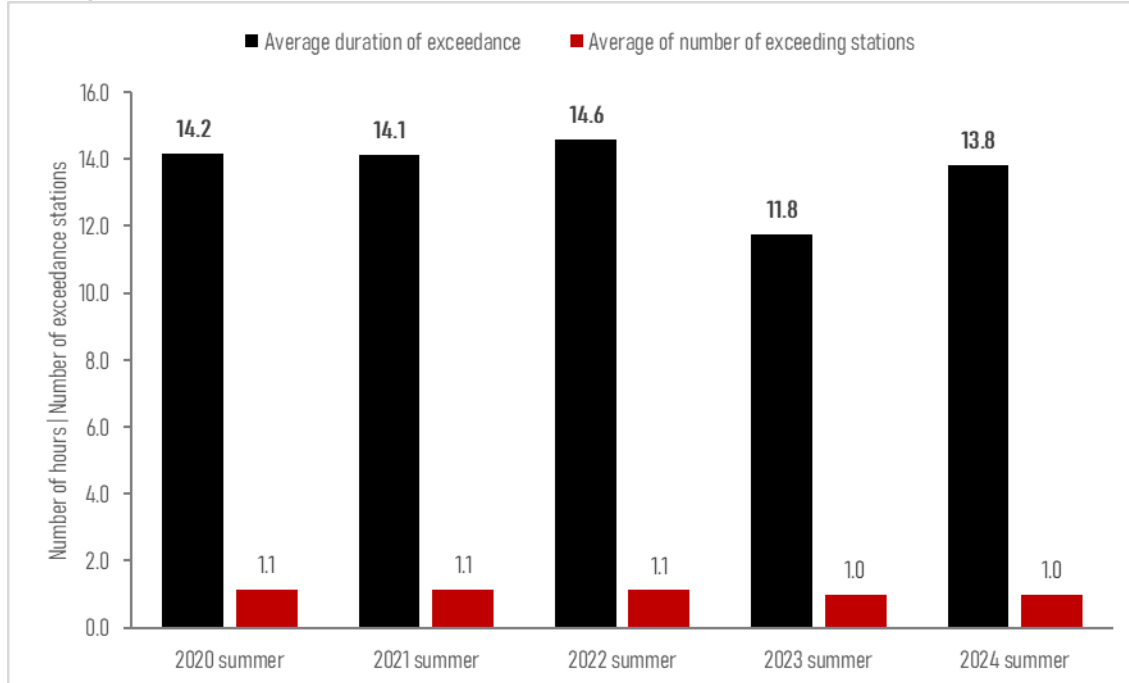


Note: Based on exceedances recorded at the monitoring stations at Chennai Metropolitan Area. Exceedance is computed as daily maximum 8-hr average crossing the ground-level ozone 8-hr standard, i.e. $100 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$. Period of study is 1 April to 18 July 2024. Source: CSE analysis of CPCB realtime data.

Geographical spread of ground-level ozone pollution in Chennai Metropolitan Area is relatively lesser this year: Ground-level ozone usually exceeds the safety standard on all days of summer in some location in Chennai Metropolitan Area every year. This year the spatial spread (number of stations exceeding the standard across Greater Chennai) has been 1 station per day for period 1 January to 30 June. On an average 1.1 stations used to exceed the standard daily during the 2020 summers (See *Graph 2: Variation in average duration and spatial spread of daily exceedance in Chennai Metropolitan Area*).

Average duration of exceedance this year has been similar to the last five years. This year so far, at the stations which reported exceedance it lasted on average 13.8 hours, it was 14,2 hours in the previous year.

Graph 2: Variation in average duration and spatial spread of daily exceedance in Chennai Metropolitan Area



Note: Based on exceedances recorded at the monitoring stations in Chennai Metropolitan Area. Exceedance is computed as daily maximum 8-hr average crossing the ground-level ozone 8-hr standard, i.e. $100 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$. Duration of exceedance is computed as number of hours the rolling 8-hr average was exceeded at a station on a day. Period of the study is 1 January to 30 June.

Source: CSE analysis of CPCB realtime data.

South Chennai neighbourhoods are the worst affected by ground-level ozone pollution in Chennai Metropolitan Area: Velachery and Perungudi in the south Chennai is the most chronically affected by ground ozone pollution in Chennai Metropolitan Area. They have exceeded the standard in this location for 6 days and 3 days respectively this year so far (See *Map 1: Hotspots of ground-level ozone exceedance in Greater Chennai Metropolitan Region* & *Table 1: Locations with most ground-level ozone exceedance in Chennai Metropolitan Area*). Alandur, Gandhi Nagar and Royapuram have least instances of ground-level ozone exceedances in the region.

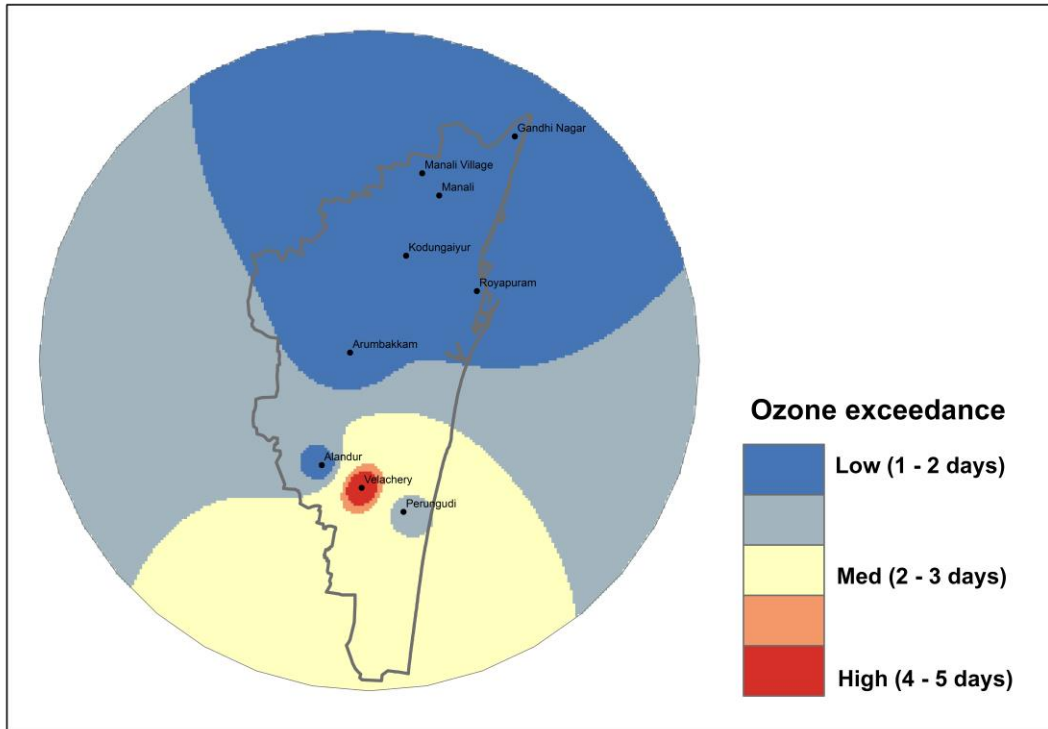
Table 1: Locations with most ground-level ozone exceedance in Chennai Metropolitan Area

SNb	Station	Number of exceedance days
1	Velachery, Chennai	6
2	Perungudi, Chennai	3
3	Alandur, Chennai	0
4	Kodungaiyur, Chennai	0
5	Manali, Chennai	0
6	Royapuram Chennai	0
7	Gandhi Nagar, Chennai	0
8	Arumbakkam Chennai	
9	Manali Village, Chennai	

Note: Exceedance is computed as daily maximum 8-hr average crossing the ground-level ozone 8-hr standard, i.e. $100 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$. Period of study is 1 January to 18 July 2024.

Source: CSE analysis of CPCB realtime data.

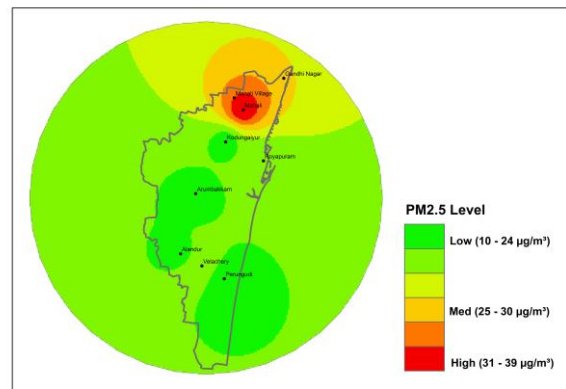
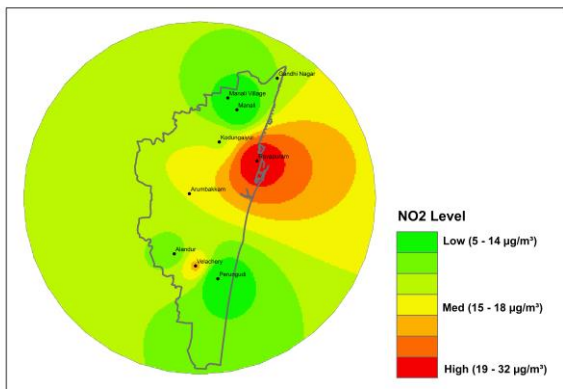
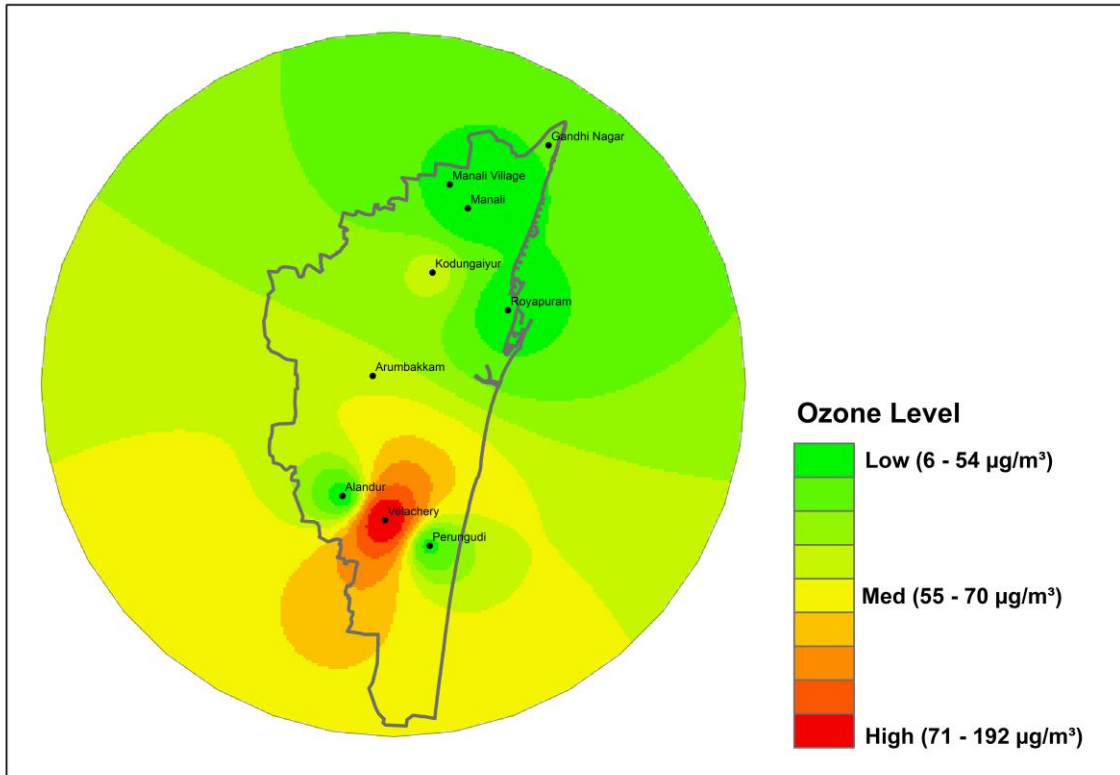
Map 1: Hotspots of ground-level ozone exceedance in Chennai Metropolitan Area



Note: Based on exceedances recorded at the monitoring stations in Chennai Metropolitan Area. Exceedance is computed as daily maximum 8-hr average crossing the ground-level ozone 8-hr standard, i.e. $100 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$. Period of study is 1 April to 18 July 2024. Source: CSE analysis of CPCB realtime data.

Ground-level ozone hotspots are located in the areas with low levels of NO₂ and PM_{2.5}: The spatial distribution of ground-level ozone is inverse of the NO₂ and PM_{2.5} (see *Map 2: Spatial relationship among hotspots for key pollutants in Chennai Metropolitan Area*). This bears out the fact that while ozone is created in polluted areas with nitrogen oxide being the catalyst, it also gets mopped up in high NO₂ areas as it further reacts. But the ozone that escapes to cleaner areas with less NO₂ builds up faster as unavailability of NO₂ hampers its dissipation. Velachery is exception to this phenomena as these stations report both high NO₂ and ground-level ozone.

Map 2: Spatial relationship among hotspots for key pollutants in Chennai Metropolitan Area



Note: Seasonal average computed as mean of monthly averages based on daily 24-hr average for PM2.5 and NO2, while daily maximum 8-hr average is used for ground-level ozone. Period of study is 1 April to 18 July 2024.
 Source: CSE analysis of CPCB realtime data.

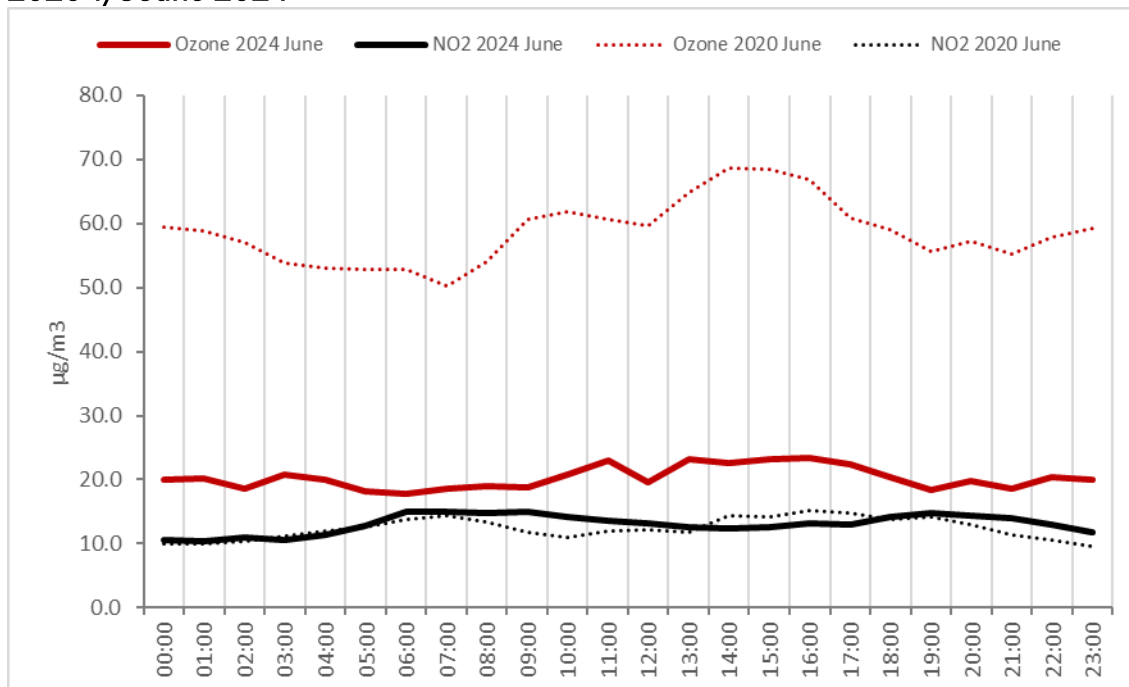
Regional hourly ozone peak level is down by 65 per cent compared to lockdown times: Since CPCB caps the data at 200 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ it is not possible to access precisely how high the ground-level ozone concentration can go up to, but for to get a relative understanding in this study hourly data averaged across all station and all days of June has been analysed. This indicative analysis shows that compared to June of 2020 ground-level ozone hourly peak on an average has gone down up by 65 per cent (See Graph 3: Hourly cycle of ground level ozone and NO2 in Chennai Metropolitan Area – June 2020 v/s June 2024). Generally morning and evening



rush-hour traffic is helping in neutralising ground-level ozone at sunrise and sunset as increased NO2 levels cannibalise it but in Chennai no such specific pattern is noted.

The maximum 8-hour average was recorded at Velachery, Chennai when level hit 192.7 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ on 10 June 2024. It was followed by Perungudi, which is the only other station in Chennai which exceeded the standard this year so far (See *Table 2: Locations with the highest daily peak ground-level ozone pollution in Chennai Metropolitan Area*). Given the data cap of 200 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ enforced by CPCB at the 15-minute granularity, this underscores the magnitude of the pollution.

Graph 3: Hourly cycle of ground-level ozone and NO2 in Chennai Metropolitan Area – June 2020 v/s June 2024



Note: 24-hr profile is based on mean hourly concentration of ground-level ozone and NO2 recorded at the monitoring stations in Chennai Metropolitan Area i for month of June in 2020 and 2023. Period of study is 1 April to 18 July 2024.
Source: CSE analysis of CPCB realtime data.

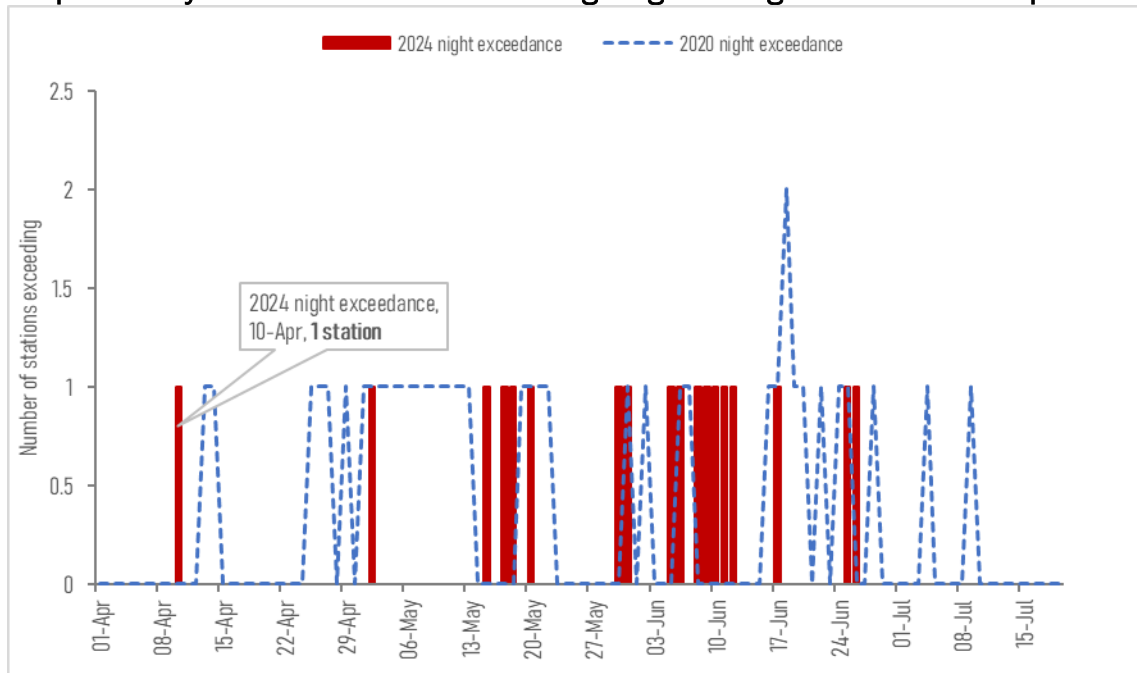
Table 2: Locations with highest daily peak ground-level ozone pollution in Chennai Metropolitan Area

SNb	Station	Highest daily 8-hr average in $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$
1	Velachery, Chennai	192.7
2	Perungudi, Chennai	106.4
3	Kodungaiyur, Chennai	87.3
4	Manali, Chennai	67.3
5	Alandur, Chennai	39.6
6	Gandhi Nagar, Chennai	27.8
7	Royapuram Chennai	23.0
8	Arumbakkam Chennai	
9	Manali Village, Chennai	

Note: Based on daily maximum 8-hr average. Period of study is 1 January to 18 July 2024.
Source: CSE analysis of CPCB realtime data.

Night-time ground-level ozone continues to persist but is not as bad as it used to be during the lockdowns: Ground-level ozone should ideally become negligible in the night air but Chennai Metropolitan Area has been witnessing a rare phenomenon where ozone levels remain elevated hours after sunset. This was found to be very wide-spread in Delhi during the lockdowns of 2020 summers but it is also noted in Chennai at a lower scale. This night-time ozone was noted at 0.2 stations on average every night (See *Graph 4: Daily variation in occurrence of high night-time ground-level ozone pollution*). It was 0.4 stations per night during the 2020 summer. Night-time ozone has been considered when hourly concentration has exceeded the level 100 µg/m³ between 10PM and 2AM at any station. Night-time ozone is most frequently in Royapuram where it was reported on 9 nights (See *Table 5: Locations with most night-time ground-level ozone pollution instances*).

Graph 4: Daily variation in occurrence of high night-time ground-level ozone pollution



Note: Based on high hourly concentration of ground-level ozone recorded at the monitoring stations in Greater Chennai during night-time. High hourly concentration is taken as 100 µg/m³ or more. Night-time is taken as 10PM to 2AM. Period of study is 1 April to 18 July 2024. Source: CSE analysis of CPCB realtime data.

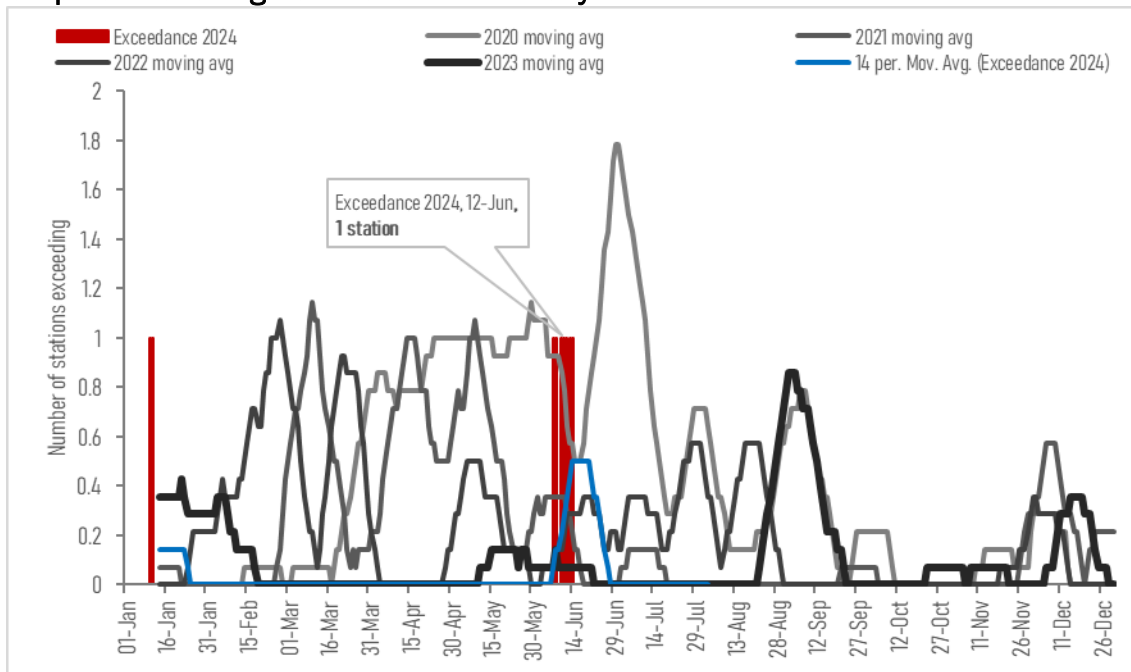
Table 5: Locations with most night-time ground-level ozone pollution instances

SNb	Station	Number of night-time exceedance
1	Royapuram Chennai	9
2	Velachery, Chennai	7
3	Perungudi, Chennai	3
4	Gandhi Nagar, Chennai	3
5	Manali, Chennai	2
6	Alandur, Chennai	0
7	Kodungaiyur, Chennai	0
8	Arumbakkam Chennai	
9	Manali Village, Chennai	

Note: Based on high hourly concentration of ground-level ozone recorded during night-time. High hourly concentration is taken as 100 µg/m³ or more. Night-time is taken as 10PM to 2AM. Period of study is 1 April to 18 July 2024. Source: CSE analysis of CPCB realtime data.

Ground-level ozone has become a yearlong problem and in Chennai there is no specific seasonal pattern: Even though the ground-level ozone exceedance is the worst during summer months, it remains a year-long problem as at least few locations continue to record exceedance throughout the year. The dangerous build-up of ground-level ozone can happen anytime during the year, but it is usually in small pockets during non-summer months. For it to have wider spatial spread hot and sunny weather conditions are needed which are generally present in Chennai Metropolitan Area throughout the year outside monsoon. Ground ozone pollution in Chennai Metropolitan Area has no specific seasonal pattern as noted in other major cities. Exceedances are generally lowest in the months of October-November but no defined peak month is noted in last five years data (See *Graph 5: Trend in ground-level ozone over years -2020-24*). On the annual scale, last year exceedance were reported on 37 days, they were 72 days in 2022, 67 days in 2021, and 135 days in 2020. This year so far only 9 days of exceedance have been recorded in Chennai Metropolitan Area.

Graph 5: Trend in ground-level ozone over years -2020-24



Note: Based on exceedances recorded at the monitoring stations in Chennai Metropolitan Area. Exceedance is computed as daily maximum 8-hr average crossing the ground-level ozone 8-hr standard, i.e. $100 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$. Duration of exceedance is computed as number of hours the rolling 8-hr average was exceeded at a station on a day. Period of the study is 1 April to 18 July.
Source: CSE analysis of CPCB realtime data.

Act now

Ozone mitigation demands stringent control of gases from all combustion sources including vehicles, industry, power plants and open burning in the entire region. It is therefore necessary that while designing mitigation of particulate matter the key focus of action strategy today, is also calibrated for reduction of ozone precursor gases.

Immediately, refine the action strategy for combined control of particulate pollution, ozone and its precursor gases like NO_x to maximise the co-benefits of the action plan.

Simultaneously develop a robust public information and dissemination system to alert public about ozone exceedance wherever ozone build up is happening for exposure management.