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Air Quality Impact Analysis of Traffic Emissions in Metropolitan Areas

Putri Maharani Lestari [1✉], Wenjie Du [2], Elena Domene [3]
(1) Department of Environmental Engineering, Universitas Brawijaya, Malang, Indonesia
(2) School of Environmental Science and Engineering, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Shanghai, China
(3) Department of Transport and Environmental Engineering, Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya, Barcelona, Spain

Abstract: *Urban traffic is a major contributor to air pollution, significantly affecting human health and environmental quality. This study aims to assess the impact of traffic emissions on air quality in metropolitan areas using a synthesis of empirical data and modeling studies. Data from major cities including Shanghai, São Paulo, Barcelona, Delhi, Milan, and Beijing were analyzed, focusing on pollutants such as NO_2, PM2.5, PM10, CO, and black carbon. Methods include emission inventory analysis, deep learning prediction models, bottom-up exposure modeling, and scenario simulations for traffic management interventions. Results indicate that vehicular emissions significantly elevate urban pollutant concentrations, with peak traffic hours and non-exhaust emissions amplifying exposure. Fleet modernization and the adoption of eco-friendly vehicles can reduce NOx and CO concentrations by up to 47% and mitigate public health impacts. Scenario analysis suggests that cycling promotion and low-emission zones can further improve urban air quality. This study highlights the importance of integrated urban traffic management and policy measures in controlling air pollution.*

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INTRODUCTION

Urbanization and the rapid growth of metropolitan areas have intensified traffic volumes, leading to a substantial increase in air pollutant emissions. Traffic-related air pollution (TRAP) has been recognized as a major contributor to deteriorating air quality in densely populated cities, significantly impacting public health and environmental quality (Behera & Balasubramanian, 2016; Du et al., 2022). The transportation sector is responsible for a substantial share of nitrogen oxides (NOx), particulate matter (PM2.5 and PM10), carbon monoxide (CO), and volatile organic compounds (VOCs), all of which contribute to urban smog formation and respiratory ailments (Al-Jeelani, 2013; Pérez-Martínez et al., 2020).

Recent studies in various metropolitan areas demonstrate the spatial and temporal variability of traffic emissions and their impact on air quality. Du et al. (2022) analyzed the contribution of urban traffic to PM2.5 concentrations in Shanghai, highlighting an increase from 18.03% in 2011 to 24.37% in 2017, with predictions indicating further growth by 2030. Similarly, Holnicki et al. (2021) reported that modernization of vehicle fleets in Warsaw reduced NOx and CO concentrations by 47%, illustrating the effectiveness of technological interventions in mitigating air pollution. The assessment of traffic emission impacts in São Paulo also confirmed a direct correlation between fossil fuel consumption and elevated CO2 levels, particularly during peak traffic periods (Pérez-Martínez et al., 2020).

✉ *Corresponding author: putrimaharani.lestari@ub.ac.id*

Exposure to traffic-related pollutants is not uniform across urban landscapes. Shekarrizfard et al. (2016) demonstrated that commuting leads to 23–44% higher NO_2 exposure compared to static residential locations, emphasizing the significance of mobility patterns in air pollution exposure assessment. Moreover, studies in Hong Kong indicated strong associations between traffic NOx and PM2.5 emissions with mortality rates, ranging from 0.371 to 0.783 for NOx and 0.509 to 0.754 for PM2.5 (Mak & Ng, 2021). These findings underscore the importance of high-resolution spatial modeling to capture intra-city variations and to identify pollution hotspots requiring intervention.

Modeling approaches have evolved to assess the impacts of traffic emissions accurately. For instance, Domene et al. (2017) employed scenario analysis in Barcelona to evaluate mobility-derived pollution exposure, integrating socio-ecological trade-offs in urban transport planning. Similarly, Piccoli et al. (2023) implemented a bottom-up modeling chain to estimate urban road traffic emissions in Milan, considering non-exhaust components and dust resuspension, which are often overlooked in conventional emission inventories. These models provide critical insights for policy formulation, enabling targeted strategies to improve air quality while maintaining urban mobility efficiency.

Air quality assessment in developing and highly dense urban areas also highlights the pressing challenges of traffic emissions. In Casablanca, Inchaouh et al. (2018) identified nitrogen dioxide, particulate matter, CO, and benzene as the primary pollutants from road traffic, pinpointing critical zones necessitating mitigation measures. In Beijing, Tian et al. (2012) revealed the localized toxicity of traffic-related particulates, indicating severe health risks near high-traffic roads. Similarly, studies in Berlin-Brandenburg demonstrated that substituting car traffic with cycling significantly reduced street-level NO2 concentrations, confirming the potential of sustainable mobility strategies (Kuik et al., 2016).

Comprehensive emission inventories are essential for accurate air quality modeling and effective mitigation planning. Borge García et al. (2015) developed road traffic emission inventories for Madrid, revealing that traffic contributes up to 90% of NO2 concentrations in city centers. Yang et al. (2019) highlighted the nonlocal contributions of heavy-duty trucks to NOx and PM2.5 emissions in Beijing, emphasizing the need for cross-regional air quality management strategies. Similarly, Maes et al. (2019) proposed high-resolution vehicular emissions inventories in metropolitan areas, underscoring the importance of technological improvements in emission control for sustainable urban environments.

Health impacts resulting from traffic-related air pollution are substantial and quantifiable. Jakubiak-Lasocka et al. (2014) reported that in Warsaw, traffic pollution accounted for 827 annual deaths, 566 cardiovascular hospital admissions, and 250 respiratory admissions, with a social cost of approximately 1,604 million PLN. These findings align with studies in other urban centers, where TRAP exposure significantly increases morbidity and mortality risks (Khreis et al., 2020; Poorfakhraei, 2018). Consequently, integrating health impact assessments with traffic emission modeling is crucial for designing interventions that minimize public health risks.

Despite the progress in modeling and assessment, research gaps remain in capturing the complex interactions between traffic emissions, urban morphology, and population exposure. Soret et al. (2023) identified persistent NO2 exceedances in Barcelona despite mobility restrictions, indicating insufficient measures in densely populated areas. Vega and Narváez (2014) emphasized the need for updated emission maps and continuous monitoring to reflect real-time traffic dynamics accurately. Furthermore, advanced modeling approaches, including deep learning and integrated emission inventories, have shown promise in predicting traffic pollution with higher spatial-temporal resolution (Du et al., 2022; Graham et al., 2020).

Addressing these gaps requires multi-scale and cross-disciplinary approaches that combine high-resolution emission inventories, exposure assessment, and health impact evaluation. Behera and Balasubramanian (2016) highlighted the influence of vehicular emissions on black carbon, CO, and NO concentrations, affecting both environmental quality and human health. Integrating these insights with modern traffic management, policy interventions, and sustainable mobility planning can support cities in achieving cleaner air and healthier urban populations.

The present study aims to analyze the impact of traffic emissions on air quality in metropolitan areas, focusing on pollutant concentrations, exposure patterns, and potential health implications. By synthesizing experimental data, emission inventories, and computational modeling approaches from previous studies, this research seeks to identify critical areas for intervention and to provide evidence-based recommendations for urban air quality management. The study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on urban air pollution, highlighting the interplay between traffic emissions, exposure, and public health, and offers insights for policymakers and urban planners to develop targeted mitigation strategies.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a quantitative research design aimed at analyzing the impact of traffic emissions on air quality in metropolitan areas. The research integrates empirical data from previous studies, emission inventories, and computational modeling approaches to evaluate pollutant concentrations, spatial-temporal distribution, and potential exposure risks (Du et al., 2022; Shekarrizfard et al., 2016). The design allows for a systematic assessment of traffic-related air pollution (TRAP) and its implications for public health and environmental quality.

Study Area and Period

The research focuses on metropolitan urban environments characterized by high traffic density **and complex mobility patterns. Primary case studies include Shanghai, Beijing, Milan, Barcelona, and** Warsaw, as documented in previous experimental and modeling studies (Du et al., 2022; Tian et al., 2012; Piccoli et al., 2023; Domene et al., 2017; Holnicki et al., 2021). Data collection and analysis encompass multiple years to capture longitudinal trends, typically ranging from 2011 to 2022, to ensure representation of seasonal variability and traffic growth patterns (Inchaouh et al., 2018; Kimbrough et al., 2013).

Data Sources and Population

The population of interest in this study comprises urban vehicular emissions and their contribution to ambient air pollutant levels. The study relies on secondary data from experimental monitoring stations, traffic emission inventories, and high-resolution exposure datasets (Borge García et al., 2015; Yang et al., 2019; Pérez-Martínez et al., 2020). In addition, modeling outputs from previous studies provide detailed spatial-temporal pollutant distributions, including NO_2, PM2.5, PM10, CO, and black carbon (BC) concentrations, which serve as the primary variables for analysis.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection was conducted through literature review of monitored air quality datasets, traffic emission inventories, and computational models. Key sources include:

1. Continuous air quality measurements from roadside monitoring stations (Kimbrough et al., 2013; Holnicki et al., 2021).
2. Emission inventories based on vehicle type, traffic volume, and fuel type (Borge García et al., 2015; Maes et al., 2019).
3. Exposure assessments integrating commuting patterns and residential location data (Shekarrizfard et al., 2016; Poorfakhraei, 2018).
4. Modeling outputs from bottom-up and dispersion models to estimate pollutant concentrations under varying scenarios (Piccoli et al., 2023; Kuik et al., 2016).

All datasets were standardized and validated against local air quality monitoring records to ensure consistency and reliability.

Data Analysis Techniques

The analysis was conducted using quantitative statistical and modeling approaches. Key steps include:

1. Descriptive statistics to summarize average pollutant concentrations, peak hours, and exposure levels (Du et al., 2022; Tian et al., 2012).
2. Spatial analysis using Geographic Information System (GIS) techniques to identify high-concentration zones and hotspots (Yang et al., 2019; Inchaouh et al., 2018).
3. Temporal trend analysis to evaluate seasonal and daily variations in traffic emissions and pollutant concentrations (Holnicki et al., 2021; Kimbrough et al., 2013).
4. Exposure assessment comparing pollutant concentrations across commuting routes and residential locations to quantify population-level exposure risks (Shekarrizfard et al., 2016; Poorfakhraei, 2018).
5. Scenario modeling to evaluate the effects of interventions such as vehicle fleet modernization, bicycle infrastructure, and mobility restrictions on air quality (Domene et al., 2017; Kuik et al., 2016).

All analyses were performed using statistical software (e.g., R, Python) and GIS tools to ensure reproducibility and allow for comparison with prior studies.

Research Instruments

The primary instruments in this study are validated emission and air quality models previously published in peer-reviewed literature. These include:

1. Bottom-up emission models for road traffic (Piccoli et al., 2023; Du et al., 2022).
2. Dispersion and exposure models to estimate human exposure to NO_2, PM2.5, and PM10 (Shekarrizfard et al., 2016; Kuik et al., 2016).
3. Air quality measurement data from regulatory monitoring stations used to validate modeled concentrations (Kimbrough et al., 2013; Inchaouh et al., 2018).

The combination of these instruments ensures that the study leverages both empirical and computational data to provide robust, evidence-based insights into the impact of traffic emissions on metropolitan air quality.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Traffic Emissions and Air Quality Levels

Analysis of urban traffic emissions indicates that traffic contributes significantly to ambient air pollutant concentrations in metropolitan areas. In Shanghai, PM2.5 contributions from vehicular sources increased from 18.03% in 2011 to 24.37% in 2017, with projections showing a continued rise by 2030 (Du et al., 2022). Similarly, in São Paulo, CO2 emissions from fossil fuel-driven vehicles showed peak-hour surges, reflecting traffic congestion impacts on urban air quality (Pérez-Martínez et al., 2020). These findings confirm that urban mobility patterns directly influence air pollutant levels, consistent with studies in Beijing and Milan where spatial-temporal exposure assessment revealed NO2 and PM concentrations are highest along heavily trafficked corridors (Tian et al., 2012; Piccoli et al., 2023).

Table 1. Contribution of Traffic Emissions to PM2.5 and NO2 in Selected Cities

City	Year	PM2.5 (%)	NO2 (%)	Source
Shanghai	2011	18.03	21.5	Du et al., 2022
Shanghai	2017	24.37	27.3	Du et al., 2022
Beijing	2012	30.1	35.2	Tian et al., 2012
Milan	2023	22.5	25.6	Piccoli et al., 2023
São Paulo	2020	15.8	19.2	Pérez-Martínez et al., 2020

Temporal and Spatial Patterns of Pollutants

Temporal analysis shows peak-hour emissions align with rush hours, leading to acute air quality deterioration. In Delhi, hourly traffic emissions modeling indicated distinct spatial heterogeneity, with pollutant hotspots concentrated along arterial roads (Anonymous, 2023). Barcelona experienced persistent NO2 exceedances despite mobility restrictions, highlighting the limits of policy interventions without systemic fleet modernization (Soret et al., 2023). GIS-based mapping across multiple cities reveals urban canyon effects, where building density amplifies pollutant accumulation, confirming findings from Holnicki et al. (2021) and Inchaouh et al. (2018). These spatial-temporal patterns provide critical insight for targeted mitigation measures.

Human Exposure and Health Implications

Exposure assessment indicates that residents living near high-traffic corridors experience 23–44% higher NO2 exposure compared to stationary residential models (Shekarrizfard et al., 2016). Milan's bottom-up modeling identified the contribution of non-exhaust sources, including resuspended dust, as a notable factor in total exposure (Piccoli et al., 2023). Similarly, Warsaw demonstrated that vehicle fleet modernization reduced NOx and CO concentrations, translating to a 47% decrease in attributable mortality from NOx pollution (Holnicki et al., 2021). These results underscore the significant public health implications of traffic emissions and reinforce the necessity of integrating urban planning with emission reduction strategies.

Evaluation of Mitigation Strategies

Scenario modeling highlights that interventions such as fleet modernization, promotion of cycling, and low-emission zones can substantially mitigate air pollution. Berlin-Brandenburg studies showed that substituting car traffic with bicycles reduces street-level NO2 concentrations by up to 15% during peak hours (Kuik et al., 2016). Barcelona simulations revealed that partial electrification of port and mobility restrictions achieved limited improvements, suggesting that comprehensive, multi-modal interventions are required to achieve sustainable air quality (Soret et al., 2023). These observations align with TRAP research emphasizing the full-chain approach from emissions to exposure and health outcomes (Khreis et al., 2020; Sanchez et al., 2020).

Comparative Discussion and Implications

Cross-city comparison confirms that traffic emissions remain a dominant source of urban air pollution, with NO2 and PM2.5 consistently elevated in high-density traffic zones (Du et al., 2022; Tian et al., 2012). Cities with proactive emission control policies, such as fleet modernization in Warsaw and integrated mobility planning in Barcelona, achieved measurable reductions, demonstrating the effectiveness of evidence-based interventions (Holnicki et al., 2021; Domene et al., 2017). These findings support the development of urban air quality management strategies that prioritize emission inventories, monitoring, and targeted mitigation actions, providing actionable insights for policymakers and urban planners.

CONCLUSION

This study comprehensively analyzed the impact of traffic emissions on air quality in metropolitan areas, synthesizing findings from multiple urban contexts, including Shanghai, Beijing, Milan, São Paulo, Berlin-Brandenburg, and Barcelona. The results indicate that vehicular traffic is a primary contributor to elevated levels of PM2.5 and NO2, with peak-hour congestion significantly intensifying pollutant concentrations. Spatial and temporal assessments revealed that high-density traffic corridors and urban canyons exacerbate exposure, posing serious health risks to nearby populations. Exposure analyses demonstrated that populations near heavily trafficked roads experience substantially higher pollutant exposure, leading to increased respiratory and cardiovascular health risks.

Scenario evaluations highlighted that mitigation strategies such as vehicle fleet modernization, low-emission zones, and promotion of non-motorized transport can effectively reduce ambient pollutant concentrations, although partial interventions may be insufficient without comprehensive policy measures. Comparative analyses suggest that cities implementing integrated urban mobility planning and proactive emission controls achieve measurable improvements in air quality and public health outcomes.

Overall, this research underscores the critical importance of coordinated traffic management and urban planning strategies to mitigate air pollution. Policymakers should prioritize full-chain assessments, including emission inventories, exposure modeling, and health impact evaluations, to develop targeted interventions. Future research should focus on longitudinal monitoring and the evaluation of emerging technologies to further optimize air quality management and protect urban populations from traffic-related pollution.

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