Enforcing Unique Code Target Property for Control-Flow Integrity

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ABSTRACT
The goal of control-flow integrity (CFI) is to stop control-hijacking attacks by ensuring that each indirect control-flow transfer (ICT) jumps to its legitimate target. However, existing implementations of CFI have fallen short of this goal because their approaches are inaccurate and as a result, the set of allowable targets for an ICT instruction is too large, making illegal jumps possible.

In this paper, we propose the Unique Code Target (UCT) property for CFI. Namely, for each invocation of an ICT instruction, there should be one and only one valid target. We develop a prototype called μCFI to enforce this new property. During compilation, μCFI identifies the sensitive instructions that influence ICT and instruments the program to record necessary execution context. At runtime, μCFI monitors the program execution in a different process, and performs points-to analysis by interpreting sensitive instructions using the recorded execution context in a memory safe manner. It checks runtime ICT targets against the analysis results to detect CFI violations. We apply μCFI to SPEC benchmarks and 2 servers (nginx and vsftpd) to evaluate its efficacy of enforcing UCT and its overhead. We also test μCFI against control-hijacking attacks, including 5 real-world exploits, 1 proof of concept COOP attack, and 2 synthesized attacks that bypass existing defenses. The results show that μCFI strictly enforces the UCT property for protected programs, successfully detects all attacks, and introduces less than 10% performance overhead.

CCS CONCEPTS
• Security and privacy → Systems security; Software and application security;

KEYWORDS
Control-flow integrity; Unique code target; Performance; Intel PT

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1 INTRODUCTION
Control-flow integrity (CFI) [1] is a principled solution to detect control-hijacking attacks, in which attackers corrupt control data, like a function pointer, to divert the control flow. It compares the runtime target of each indirect control-flow transfer (ICT) instruction (i.e., indirect call/jmp or ret) against a set of allowed targets, and reports any discrepancy as control-hijacking attacks.

The strength of a CFI system hinges on its model of secure behavior, expressed via its set of allowed targets for ICT instructions. An overly strict model breaks system functionality due to false alarms, while a permissive model can be evaded by attackers, like in [10, 25, 55]. These attacks highlight an inherent mismatch between current CFI models that rely on static analysis and the ideal model: static analysis identifies benign targets for each ICT instruction from all possible runs, while the ideal model defines the valid targets for each ICT instruction for only the currently observed execution. Recent approaches use runtime information to reduce the number of allowed targets [21, 48, 61]. However, these methods still permit hundreds of targets for some ICT instructions. Consider a code pointer retrieved from an array via a variable index. Without knowing the index value, CFI solutions have to treat all array elements as allowed targets.

In this paper, we propose a necessary feature of a precise CFI — the Unique Code Target (UCT) property. This property requires that at each step of a protected execution, a program may only transition to one unique valid target. For an execution without any attack, the allowed target for each invocation of an ICT instruction is the same as the one used in the execution to avoid false alarms. When control data is corrupted to hijack the execution path, the model should detect the deviation and conclude a control-hijacking attack. Similar to existing CFI work, we focus on control-data attacks and consider non-control data attacks [14, 32] out of scope.

The key to achieving the UCT property is collecting the necessary runtime information and using it to augment the points-to analysis on control data. As such information helps constrain the set of allowed targets, we call it constraining data. However, it is not trivial to design a CFI system that satisfies the UCT property. Specifically, we have to address the following three challenges, 1) how to accurately identify the constraining data, 2) how to collect this data efficiently, and 3) how to perform the points-to analysis efficiently and accurately.
We propose a system, μCFI, to address the aforementioned challenges and enforce the UCT property. μCFI performs static data-flow analysis to accurately identify constraining data from the program source code. The analysis starts from code pointers, and recursively identifies variables that are involved in calculating known constraining data. We also develop a novel arbitrary data collection technique to record all constraining data at runtime efficiently. Specifically, we encode the constraining data as indirect control-flow transfers, and rely on a hardware feature, Intel Processor Trace (PT) for efficient recording. μCFI runs a monitor in parallel with the program execution to parse recorded constraining data and uses it to argue points-to-analysis. To support efficient analysis, we construct partial execution paths to avoid wasting effort on security-unrelated operations. For each invocation of each ICT instruction, the monitor compares the real target against the points-to-analysis result, and reports inconsistencies as attacks.

We implement our design as a compiler and an execution monitor. The monitor performs CFI checks in a different process after each ICT instruction. To ensure security, it interacts with the kernel to block the program execution at any security-sensitive system call until all prior CFI checks succeed. This is similar to existing CFI enforcement approaches [15, 21, 23, 61] and aims to prevent attackers from inflicting damage on the system. Our prototype focuses on forward-edge CFI (i.e., protecting call and jmp), and leaves backward-edge CFI (i.e., protecting ret) to existing solutions [17, 33, 54]. We integrate a shadow stack [17] into μCFI to demonstrate its compatibility with backward-edge CFI solutions.

To measure the effectiveness and efficiency of our solution, we use μCFI to protect several benchmarks and real-world programs, including 14 SPEC CPU 2006 benchmarks, nginx web server, and vsftpd FTP server, from 5 real-world exploits, 1 proof of concept COOP attack, and 2 synthesized attacks that bypass existing defenses. μCFI successfully enforces the UCT property at each invocation of each ICT instruction for all tested programs. Attacks are successfully detected and blocked by μCFI, as they trigger CFI violations at runtime. μCFI introduces around 10% overhead to the protected system. To ensure security, it interacts with the kernel to block the program execution at any security-sensitive system call until all prior CFI checks succeed. This is similar to existing CFI enforcement approaches [15, 21, 23, 61] and aims to prevent attackers from inflicting damage on the system. Our prototype focuses on forward-edge CFI (i.e., protecting call and jmp), and leaves backward-edge CFI (i.e., protecting ret) to existing solutions [17, 33, 54]. We integrate a shadow stack [17] into μCFI to demonstrate its compatibility with backward-edge CFI solutions.

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- **Unique code target property.** We propose the UCT property as the ultimate goal of control-flow integrity. A CFI system that enforces the UCT property has exactly one allowed target for each invocation of each indirect control-flow transfer.
- **Enforcement of UCT property.** We design and implement an end-to-end system to enforce the UCT property. To achieve this goal, we develop novel solutions to record arbitrary execution information to support complete dynamic program analysis. At the same time, we develop several techniques to enable efficient UCT enforcement.
- **Empirical evaluation.** We evaluate our system on common benchmarks, real-world servers, and attacks. The results show that μCFI successfully enforces the UCT property on all tested programs with around 10% overhead.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. §2 illustrates the problem we address. We describe our design in §3 and present implementation details in §4. §5 describes an empirical evaluation of our approach and §6 discusses implications of our system. We cover the related work in §7, and conclude in §8. Appendix A formally states and proves the correctness of our approach.

## 2 PROBLEM

In this section, we demonstrate the weakness of existing CFI implementations with a motivating example and present our idea for enforcing the UCT property.

### 2.1 Motivating example

Figure 1 shows a vulnerable code snippet that allows attackers to hijack the control-flow. Function handleReq contains a stack-based buffer overflow vulnerability at line 16, where the user input (pointed to by input) is copied into a fixed-size buffer buf without proper boundary checking. Attackers can craft inputs to corrupt local variables on the stack, like the function pointer fun. When fun is used at line 17 for the indirect function call, attackers can hijack the execution to perform a malicious action.

Control-flow integrity aims to prevent such attacks. The idea is to find the expected target(s) for each indirect control-flow transfer.
and compare it with the real target at runtime to detect inconsistencies. In this example, CFI will try to validate the value of `fun` at line 17. Ideally, the check only permits one target for each run, which is function `A` if `uid` is 0, function `B` if `uid` is 1, or function `C` if `uid` is 2. If `fun` is corrupted to any other value, CFI will detect that the ICT target is inconsistent and terminate the execution to prevent any possible damage.

### 2.2 Incomplete protection by existing CFIs

Here we demonstrate the weakness of existing CFI solutions in preventing attacks against this code. Table 1 shows the allowed target sets enforced by different CFI solutions at line 17 of Figure 1 when `uid` is 1. If the vulnerable code is not protected ("no CFI"), attackers can divert the control flow to any executable location ("in the table"). The type-based CFI solutions allow all functions whose types match with the callsite [46, 59, 62], and thus permit 5 targets (`A`, `B`, `C`, `D`, `E`) for the function pointer `fun`. Static CFI solutions have to permit all possible targets for all possible benign inputs. Assuming there is an oracle that can enumerate all possible execution paths\(^1\), static CFI will enforce 3 targets: `A`, `B` and `C`. As such oracle is still unavailable, real-world static CFI over-approximates the set of allowed targets. Since it does not consider runtime information, this set is the same across all invocations of the code.

We also consider two dynamic CFI solutions, \(\pi\)CFI and PittyPat, and conclude that neither successfully enforces the ideal CFI policy for this vulnerable code. \(\pi\)CFI starts with an empty set and adds functions at runtime as the function addresses are referenced. The code at line 6 uses the addresses of functions `A`, `B`, and `C`, so \(\pi\)CFI adds them to the allowed targets set. Similarly, it adds function `D` to the set at line 7 for variable `fpt`. Therefore, \(\pi\)CFI allows 4 targets at line 17. PittyPat provides the best security guarantee among the existing solutions in Table 1 by utilizing the dynamic execution path to perform points-to analysis. For example, at line 6, PittyPat updates the points-to relationship for each variable, e.g., `arr[1]` points to `B`. PittyPat works well when it can infer the points-to relationship from the execution path, but has to make approximations when it cannot. For example, at line 14 fun is either assigned the value of `arr[1]` or `arr[2]` depending on the value of `uid`. Since PittyPat cannot obtain this value from the execution path, it has to allow both targets at line 17. Attackers can choose between calling functions `B` or `C`.

### 2.3 Enforcing UCT with full context

We propose to use the full execution context to perform online points-to analysis on control data to enforce the UCT property. Unlike previous solutions, we collect both the control-flow and the necessary non-control data needed to produce a unique target for each ICT. We refer to such non-control data as constraining data, which we define by its property as follows:

**Constraining data** plays an important role in the calculation of the indirect control-flow transfer target. However, it is neither a control data that directly represents a code address, nor a pointer that will be dereferenced during the code pointer retrieval. The value of a constraining data cannot be inferred from even the accurate execution path until the affected indirect control-flow transfer happens. Once its value is known, the analysis can accurately deduce the unique ICT target for any execution path. Any data satisfying such properties is an instance of constraining data. In the motivating example in Figure 1, the function argument `uid` is constraining data since it is used to determine the function pointer `fun` during the array access at line 14, without which any analysis has to overapproximate the access result. There are three challenges to collect constraining data and perform full-context-based points-to analysis in real-world programs:

- **Constraining data identification.** We need to accurately identify constraining data from a tremendous number of program variables. Collecting superfluous data burdens both the collection and analysis.
- **Arbitrary data collection.** No method can efficiently pass arbitrary data from the execution to the analyzer. For example, hardware features like Intel PT only capture change of flow information [21]. Naive solutions with shared files or memory have adverse effects on the cache, leading to significant performance overhead [34].
- **Efficient analysis.** Dynamic analysis with execution context is time-consuming [21, 23], and thus may slow down the protected execution.

In this paper, we propose novel solutions to address these challenges and achieve efficient UCT enforcement. Before presenting our design, we define our threat model and provide a brief introduction of Intel PT.

### 2.4 Threat Model & Background

Our threat model is the same as related works [1, 59, 68, 69], in which the adversary has full control over the victim’s process memory within the constraints of hardware page protection. Therefore, he can perform memory reads or writes at any time during the victim execution. His goal is to exploit memory errors (e.g., buffer overflow) to hijack control. We focus on user space attacks, making kernel exploits out of scope. For simplicity, we do not consider dynamically generated code (e.g., JIT code emission).

**Intel Processor Trace.** Intel PT is a hardware feature in modern Intel CPUs, which efficiently collects change of flow information. PT only collects events that cannot be derived statically. Specifically, TNT packets record the branches taken by conditional jumps, TIP packets log the targets of indirect control-flow transfers, FUP packets log control-flow transfers caused by signals and interrupts, and PGE and PGD packets indicate the addresses where PT enables and disables tracing, respectively. With a PT trace, we can completely reconstruct the program’s runtime execution path. PT records traces directly to physical memory, bypassing the standard processor caches to minimize performance side-effects. Since the trace is collected by hardware and is only configurable from Ring 0, the attacker cannot use it as a channel to directly attack the monitor or evade its data collection.

### 3 SYSTEM DESIGN

We design \(\mu\)CFI as the first UCT enforcement system. It consists of two components, the static compiler and the dynamic monitor, as
shown in Figure 2. Given the program source code, the compiler performs static analysis to identify all constraining data (§3.1). It instruments the program to encode such data as indirect control-flows for efficient record (§3.2). At the same time, it assigns each basic block a unique ID and records them in the same way (§3.3). 

µCFI compiler takes the program source code as input and identifies constraining data. When the binary is executed, the µCFI monitor performs points-to analysis in an isolated parallel process. It parses PT trace from the kernel driver to decode basic block ID (§3.3) and constraining data. With basic block ID, the monitor identifies executed basic blocks, and performs points-to analysis for every instruction. With the help of constraining data, the analysis generates the unique target for each ICT instruction (§3.4). After each indirect control-flow transfer, the monitor compares the real target used by the program (recorded in PT trace) with the allowed target from the points-to-analysis (§3.5). If they do not match, the monitor informs the kernel to terminate the execution to prevent damage to the system.

3.1 Constraining data identification

As we define in §2.3, constraining data is involved in calculation of code pointers, but their values cannot be directly inferred from the execution path. Based on this property, we define a static analysis procedure in algorithm 1 to find all constraining data in two phases: first, we collect instructions related to ICT target calculation; second, we check operands of these instructions to find non-constant values - such values are constraining data.

In the first phase, we collect all instructions that directly or indirectly involve function pointer calculation. Direct involvement means the instruction reads or writes a function pointer. Indirect involvement means that the instruction prepares the data for direct involvement, like retrieving the pointer of the function pointer. We use a recursive approach to identify all such instructions. From line 1 to line 6, our algorithm checks all data types used in the program to locate sensitive types. A sensitive type is either a function pointer type (line 3), or a composite type containing some members whose type is known to be sensitive (line 4-6). We repeat the search until no new sensitive type can be found. Then from line 7 to line 15, the algorithm checks all instructions to identify the sensitive instructions that either produce a value with a sensitive type (line 9), or involve the calculation of an already-identified sensitive instruction. For example, lines 10 and 11 check whether the value read from or written to the memory has been labeled as sensitive. If so, it will add the pointer to the sensitive instruction set. We redact the code to process other type instructions at line 15 for brevity.

In the second phase, the algorithm checks the operands of each sensitive instruction (line 16-19). Any operand that is neither in the sensitive instruction set nor a constant value (line 18) is treated as constraining data and is added to the appropriate set (line 19). The algorithm returns the set of identified constraining data.

Table 2 shows the result of constraining data identification on the code in Figure 1. Our analysis finds two sensitive types (i.e., function pointer type void (char*)* and function pointer array type [3 x void (char*)*]), six sensitive instructions and one constraining data uid. As uid is neither a sensitive value, nor a constant in the sensitive instruction: fun = arr[uid], it is constraining data.

3.2 Arbitrary data collection

We design a novel method to efficiently pass any information from the execution to the monitor. Our method uses software instrumentation to encode any data into control data, and then utilizes Intel PT to generate the encoded trace efficiently. As we discuss in §2.2,
Table 2: Identifying constraining data from code in Figure 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>sensitive type</th>
<th>void (char*)*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sensitive instruction</td>
<td>FP arr[3] = {A, B, C}; FP fun = D; fun = NULL; fun = arr[0]; fun = arr[uid]; (*fun)(buf);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>constraining data</td>
<td>uid</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

typical PT tracing without our instrumentation cannot achieve the UCT property due to the lack of non-control information.

μCFI implements two functions, write_data in the protected program to encode arbitrary data, and read_data in the monitor to restore data for analysis, as shown in Figure 3. To log an arbitrary value av, μCFI instruments the program to call write_data with av as the argument. write_data divides av into several chunks, each containing 8 bits (lines 13 and 15). write_data adds a constant base pointer BASE_ADDR to each chunk to get a new code pointer (line 13) and uses the new pointer to launch an indirect function call (line 14). PT will record the new code pointer value into the trace. The base code pointer points to a special area (function allRet) filled with $2^N$ one-byte return instructions ($0xc3$ for Intel CPU). Therefore, the indirect call immediately returns and write_data will process the next chunk (line 12). The μCFI monitor recovers the encoded value by calling function read_data. read_data reads PT packets from the trace, and restores the chunk value by subtracting the base code pointer value BASE_ADDR from the PT packet (line 21). By accumulating chunk values, read_data gets the encoded data (line 22). Then the monitor can perform online points-to analysis with the decoded data. μCFI imposes a small footprint in the data cache by sharing only a minimal set of constraining data (see §5 for performance and code overhead evaluation).

Security consequence. Readers may worry about that adding write_data to the protected program introduces another indirect function call and thus enlarges the attack surface. We clarify that such instrumentation does not change the program security, as attackers cannot utilize this indirect function call to build any exploit. In our implementation of write_data, the mask operation on av at line 13 guarantees that the offset from BASE_ADDR is within the boundary of the allRet function. The new_ptr variable is stored in a register, which is out of the attacker’s control. Even if attackers corrupt the value of av, the execution will merely call a different ret instruction and return to the same location as a benign call.

Figure 4a shows the instrumented code from Figure 1. Since uid is constraining data in the instruction at line 14, the compiler inserts write_data(uid) at line 13 to record it. Consider an example that passes 0xABBCCDDEEEFFF from the execution to the analysis. Suppose that the special executable region allRet starts from address 0x1000, and that μCFI uses 12-bit value as a chunk. write_data will trigger 6 indirect function calls, each encoding 12 bits (the last one encodes 4 bits). Then PT trace will contain the following packets: {0x1FFF, 0x1EEE, 0x1D0D, 0x1CCC, 0x1B8B, 0x100A}.

3.3 Efficient control-flow construction

μCFI monitor constructs the dynamic control-flow at LLVM IR-level from the PT trace so that the analyzer can perform points-to analysis for every executed IR instruction. However, constructing IR-level paths incurs the following two challenges. The first one is the time-consuming parsing of PT traces. Previous work [21, 23] demonstrates that reconstructing the complete execution path from the highly-compressed PT trace is computation-intensive. Griffin [23] has to use six extra kernel threads to achieve acceptable performance. The second challenge is the inconsistency between the binary-level path and the IR-level path. Due to complicated compiler optimizations (e.g., instruction scheduling and loop-invariant code motion), binary-level control-flow significantly differs from LLVM IR-level flow. Disabling all optimizations helps mitigate the inconsistency, but cannot completely solve this problem, and more importantly, hurts performance.

Our accurate and efficient IR-level control-flow reconstruction is inspired by three observations. First, regardless of optimizations, the compilation process always retains the program’s high-level functionality, including the order of side-effecting operations (e.g., memory access and function call). As long as one IR-level control-flow has the same order of side-effecting operations as the binary-level control-flow, the analysis on it will be functionally equivalent to the analysis on an ideal IR-level flow (which exactly matches the binary-level flow). Second, instructions inside the same basic block get executed in a fixed order from the first to the last. Therefore, we simply need the control-flow on IR basic block level. Third, our points-to analysis does not require a complete control-flow. It merely requires the execution order of sensitive instructions (defined in §3.1). Such instructions usually account for a small portion of the whole program. Therefore, a partial control-flow covering all sensitive instructions should suffice.
Our method for constructing IR-level control-flow is as follows. 

\[ (*) \text{fun}(buf); \]
\[ \text{strcpy(buf, input)}; \]
\[ \text{fun} = \text{arr}[0]; \]
\[ \text{fun} = \text{arr}[uid]; \]
\[ \text{while} (\text{true}) \{
\]
\[ \text{if} \ (\text{uid} < 0 \text{ or } \text{uid} > 2) \text{return};
\]
\[ \text{if} \ (\text{uid} == 0) \{
\]
\[ \text{write_data(ID3)}; // BBID ID3
\]
\[ \text{fun} = \text{arr}[0]; // s-instr
\]
\[ \} \text{else}
\]
\[ \{ \]
\[ \text{write_data(ID4)}; // BBID ID4
\]
\[ \text{write_data(ID3)}; // BBID ID3
\]
\[ \text{fun} = \text{arr}[uid]; // c-data
\]
\[ \}
\]
\[ \text{write_data(ID4)}; // BBID ID4
\]
\[ \}
\]
\[ \}
\]
\[ \]
the monitor concludes that memory corruption occurred and terminates the protected program. In the strongest security policy, the monitor would block the execution after each ICT instruction to validate the target. However, frequent suspensions introduce an unacceptably high performance overhead. Therefore, µCFI performs CFI checks in parallel with the execution and only suspends the execution at critical system calls. It waits for the validation logic to finish checking all indirect control-flow transfers, and then resumes the execution if no CFI violations are detected. We consider the following system calls to be security-sensitive, similar to many other security systems [15, 21, 50, 61]: mmap, mremap, remap_file_pages, mprotect, execve, execveat, sendmsg, sendmmsg, sendto, and write.

µCFI focuses on determining the unique target for each invocation of each ICT instruction. Attackers may corrupt the constraining data before it is recorded by PT, as we do not enforce data integrity. In this case, our analysis may derive the wrong ICT target and thus miss an attack. However, malicious corruption of constraining data falls into the category of non-control data attacks [14, 32] and is thus out of the scope of this work.

4 IMPLEMENTATION

We implement a prototype of µCFI on x86_64 system with 6010 source lines of code for the program compiler and the execution monitor. We choose x86_64 system as it is widely used and long-term supported. However, our idea of enforcing the UCT property is general and applicable to similar systems, like x86.

Our compiler is built on top of LLVM 3.6, with a LLVM pass for IR-level instrumentation and a set of updates to the X86 backend for assembly-level instrumentation. The LLVM pass performs the constraining data identification and encoding, and the BBID encoding, as we discuss in Section §3. The updated X86 backend helps achieve trace size reduction and shadow stack protection, which we will discuss in this section. We implement the monitor as one root user process, which makes it suitable for protecting non-root processes. However, this is only a limitation of the current implementation and not the overall design, which can have a kernel monitor or additional protection mechanisms (e.g., SELinux). It uses two threads, one for PT trace parsing and another for points-to analysis and CFI validation. We use a modified version of the PT driver from Griffin [24] for trace management, in which we write the trace into per-thread pseudo-files and set appropriate permissions for our user-space µCFI monitor to read it. Next we present several implementation details of the µCFI system, including efforts for trace reduction, integration with shadow stack, and a practical type analyzer for the points-to analysis.

Trace reduction. PT allows users to specify the traced code range of a particular program, and only generates packets when the program executes inside the traced range. To utilize this feature to minimize the trace size, we perform program instrumentation to redirect all necessary packets into one dedicated code range. Specifically, we implement a function iCall to realize indirect function calls, and a function oneRet to achieve function returns. µCFI compiler replaces each indirect function call in the program with a direct call to iCall, with the original function pointer as the first argument. iCall contains one indirect jump instruction that goes to the address specified in the argument. µCFI replaces each ret instruction with a direct jump to the oneRet function, which contains one ret instruction to perform function return. During the execution, we configure the trace range to cover only oneRet and iCall, which is 48 bytes (8 for instruction and 40 for padding). In this way, we avoid all TNT packets that usually dominate PT traces. We show that our trace reduction significantly reduces the size and helps mitigate the performance overhead of parsing in Section §5.3.

Integration with shadow stack. To demonstrate the compatibility of µCFI with existing backward-edge CFI solutions, we implement a parallel shadow stack in µCFI compiler [17]. Parallel shadow stack saves return addresses in a different stack, but with a fixed (optionally randomized) offset from the original location. Upon function return, it compares the two versions of the return address to detect attacks, or overwrites the one on the real stack with the shadowed copy to disable attacks. Our implementation of parallel shadow stack contains a patch to LLVM X86 backend, and an ELF constructor function. The former inserts two assembly instructions into each function, one at the function entry for saving the return address to the shadow stack, and another before the ret instruction for bringing the shadow copy back. ELF constructor functions are invoked by the binary loader before giving control to the program code, which we use to set up the shadow stack and create guard pages between two stacks. We evaluate it with µCFI in Section §5.4.

Lazy type analysis. Type flattening is the technique of representing a composite type as basic types [21, 30, 38]. Our points-to analysis requires type flattening to represent an object as a set of (node, offset) pairs, each representing a basic-type element. The common way to flatten a type is to recursively replace its element types with their definitions until all elements have basic types. However, this method requires accurate type information during the object allocation, which may not be available in highly optimized LLVM IR. We propose lazy flattening to expand an object when it is accessed at runtime. During the object allocation, we represent it as an empty set. When it is accessed through a pointer (node,x), we know that at offset x the object has an element with a particular type, and will update the object representation accordingly. Therefore, lazy flattening tolerates the type missing problem. However, it may slow down the analysis due to the dynamic type analysis. µCFI uses a hybrid solution: we flatten an object as much as possible based on the type information during its allocation, and use lazy type flattening to address the type missing problem.

5 EVALUATION

We perform empirical evaluations to answer the following questions regarding µCFI’s security and performance:

Q1. can µCFI enforce the unique code target property?
Q2. can µCFI prevent real-world advanced attacks?
Q3. what is the cost of using µCFI for protection?
Q4. can µCFI work well with backward CFI solutions?

Benchmarks. We use µCFI to protect 14 SPEC CPU2006 benchmarks and 2 real-world applications, the nginx web server and the vsftpd file server, and measure the allowed target number among all executed ICT instructions (Q1). We also measure the overhead of µCFI on these benchmarks and applications, including execution time, memory usage, and code size (Q3). We collect 5 publicly available control-hijacking attacks against 4 vulnerable applications, 1...
Table 3: Evaluation result of μCFI on SPEC CPU2006, nginx and vsftpd. We measure the number of allowed targets for all ICT instructions in Allowed Target #. We report the overhead introduced by μCFI regarding time, memory, and code size; instru only covers code instrumentation; monitor also considers the μCFI monitoring; +stack integrates the parallel shadow stack. Other columns show the number of PT packets for BBID, return, and constraining data. – means no function pointer. Gray rows indicate C++ benchmarks. We calculate an extra average, excluding benchmarks without any ICT instruction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>kilo-sLOC</th>
<th>Allowed Target #</th>
<th>Time Overhead (%)</th>
<th>Mem (%)</th>
<th>vCode (%)</th>
<th>PT Packet #</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>μCFI</td>
<td>instru</td>
<td>+monitor</td>
<td>+stack</td>
<td>βBBID</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>w/o c-data</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>perlbmk</td>
<td>128.2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1–1.8e+19</td>
<td>13.79</td>
<td>49.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bzip2</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mcf</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>-0.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>milc</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>namd</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gobmk</td>
<td>157.7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1–1.8e+19</td>
<td>4.96</td>
<td>8.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>soplex</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>3.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>1.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sjeng</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>10.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>libquantum</td>
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<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lh26-4ref</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1–1200</td>
<td>6.53</td>
<td>24.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>1</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>10.09</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>all above</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>2.65</strong></td>
<td><strong>7.88</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>w/o mcf, libq &amp; libm</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>10.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>GeoMean</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>1.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Variance</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>1.92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| nginx (/req) | 103.4 | 1 | 1–6.26e+19 | 0.46 | 4.05 | 4.05 | 11.9 | 5.61 | 20.25 | 11K | 2K | 7K |
| vsftpd (/req) | 16.5  | 1 | 1–13      | 1.13 | 0.75 | 0.83 | n/a  | 4.77 | 17.29 | 10K | 10K | 603 |

proof of concept COOP attack, and synthesize 2 advanced attacks that bypass existing CFI implementations. Then we check whether μCFI can prevent such attacks (Q2). We integrate one representative shadow stack, the parallel shadow stack [17], to check the compatibility of μCFI with backward-edge CFI solutions (Q4). We evaluate the correctness and overhead of the combined protection.

Due to the data loss problem of Intel PT, we cannot perform end-to-end evaluation for some SPEC benchmarks. We check this issue in §6.3 and discuss the missed benchmarks in §6.4.

**Setup.** We perform our evaluation on a 64-bit Ubuntu 16.04 system, equipped with an 8-core Intel i7-7740X CPU (4.30GHz frequency) and 32 GB RAM. We compile each program in two steps. First, we use llvm [52] to generate the baseline binary and the LLVM IR representation of the whole program. Second, we use μCFI compiler to instrument the IR and generate the protected executable. Both compilations take default optimization levels and options, like, -O2 for SPEC and -O1 for nginx and vsftpd. We use the provided train data sets to evaluate SPEC benchmarks. For nginx and vsftpd, we set up the server on our evaluation environment, and request files with different size from another machine in the same local network. We request each file for 1000 times to avoid accidental deviations. To measure the overhead, we launch the protected execution together with the monitor, and count the time till all processes exit, including the protected execution, the monitor and their child processes.

**Result summary.** Table 3 and Table 4 summarize our evaluation results. μCFI successfully enforces the UCT property for tested programs as it only allows one valid target for all indirect control-flow transfers (Q1). μCFI introduces 7.88% runtime overhead for evaluated SPEC benchmarks on average, 4.05% runtime overhead for nginx and less than 1% overhead for vsftpd (Q2). This means that μCFI can efficiently protect these programs with a strong security guarantee. All attacks, including the real-world attacks, the COOP proof of concept attack and the synthesized attacks, are blocked by μCFI at runtime (Q3). Programs compiled with μCFI and the shadow stack work well. The combined protection introduces extra 2.07% overhead to SPEC benchmarks, and negligible extra overhead to nginx and vsftpd (Q4).

### 5.1 Enforcing UCT property

μCFI successfully enforces the unique code target property for evaluated SPEC CPU2006 benchmarks, nginx and vsftpd, as shown in the μCFI column (under Allowed target #) of Table 3, in which all ICT instructions have one and only one allowed target. SPEC benchmarks mcf, libquantum and libm do not have ICT instructions in their LLVM IR, so we skip their numbers in the column.

#### 5.1.1 Necessity of constraining data

To understand the advantage of μCFI, we emulate the analysis without constraining data (like in PittyPat [21]) to estimate the number of allowed targets for ICT instructions. Specifically, we associate each sensitive data with a counter variable to represent the number of its possible sources. This value is initialized as 1, and gets propagated among sensitive instructions. If one instruction uses constraining data to derive the destination from the source, we multiply the source value by the maximum value of the constraining data and assign the result to the destination. The multiplication represents the inevitable overestimation the analysis has to make to conservatively permit all possible targets. We infer the maximum value of the constraining data from static analysis if possible (e.g., static array size); otherwise
we use its concrete value at runtime as an under-approximation. vsftpd is simpler, like one target (55%) or two (40%), and a few with 128 targets. Our estimation shows that without constraining data, data to achieve the UCT property.

for ICT instructions, where the analysis has to use constraining forces one target for all invoked ICT instructions. However, we find namd, attackers have substantial flexibility to divert the control flow, even one target only account for 45%. The allowed target numbers for 2

have less than 64 (\(2^1\)) to the maximum integer (i.e., ULONG_MAX) to the maximum 8-byte value, due to the cascading of candidate locations, leading to the large allowed target number. Case study 2: cascading access. gobmk has the largest allowed target number (the maximum 8-byte value), due to the cascading of constraining data. Specifically, one value derived from constraining data is used to calculate a second value together with other constraining data, in which the counter is multiplied by two maximum values. Figure 7 shows one example of cascaded access, in which index1, index2, and index3 are constraining data. Here we use the concrete value to estimate the maximum constraining data. At line 10, tmp is retrieved from pattern_list with index1, and its counter will be multiplied by index1. When tmp is saved into the list, each list element may have counter*index1 sources. Then after another iteration, each element will have counter*index1*index1 sources. In this way, the counter value increases quickly. When tmp is used at line 17, the allowed target number is very large.

Column (w/o c-data) shows our estimation results, in which 4 SPEC benchmarks and both real world applications will permit significantly more targets if the analysis does not use constraining data. sjeng always permits 7 targets for its only ICT instruction, while another 5 applications allow targets varying from small counts (e.g., 2) to the maximum integer (i.e., ULONG_MAX on Linux). We draw the distribution of allowed target number for gobmk, h264ref, nginx and vsftpd in Figure 5, where the X-axis shows the binary logarithm of allowed target numbers. The distribution of allowed target numbers for gobmk varies from input to input, in which ICTs with more than one target range from 5% to 35%. Most ICTs

Case study 1: reading code pointer from a huge table. h264ref permits up to 1200 targets if the constraining data is not available. We inspect its execution trace and figure out that the large number is caused by reading a code pointer from a huge table with a variable index, as shown in Figure 6. Structure ImageParameters contains an array of 1200 SyntaxElement instances, while structure SyntaxElement has a function pointer mapping. h264ref gets the structure pointer currSE from that array (line 5), and uses the function pointer in the pointed structure for an indirect function call (line 9). The index used to retrieve the structure pointer is constraining data, without which the analysis has to conservatively take all 1200 elements as the potentially retrieved pointer. When currSE is dereferenced to get the function pointer, there are up to 1200 candidate locations, leading to the large allowed target number.

1 struct { void (*mapping)(...); } SyntaxElement;
2 struct { SyntaxElement MB_SyntaxElements[1200]; } *img;
3 int writeMBLayer (int rdopt) {
4   /* index is the constraining data to determine currSE */
5   SyntaxElement *currSE = &img->MB_SyntaxElements[index];
6   writeSyntaxElement_UVL(currSE, ...);
7 }
8 int writeSyntaxElement_UVL(SyntaxElement *se, ...) {
9   se->mapping(se->value1, ...);
10 }

Figure 6: Simplified h264ref code snippet that retrieves a function pointer from a large structure array.

Figure 5: Cumulative distribution of allowed target number in h264ref, nginx, vsftpd and gobmk. X-axis shows the binary logarithm of allowed target numbers. Executions with constraining data always have unique targets, and therefore produce the horizontal line on the top.

Figure 7: Simplified gobmk code snippet that cascades memory access with constraining data.

/* index is the constraining data to determine currSE */
int (*mapping)(...); } SyntaxElement;
struct { SyntaxElement MB_SyntaxElements[1200]; } *img;
int writeMBLayer (int rdopt) {
   SyntaxElement *currSE = &img->MB_SyntaxElements[index];
   writeSyntaxElement_UVL(currSE, ...);
}
int writeSyntaxElement_UVL(SyntaxElement *se, ...) {
   se->mapping(se->value1, ...);
}

typedef int (*autohelper_fn_ptr)(...);
typedef int (*autohelper_fn_ptr)(...);
typedef int (*autohelper_fn_ptr)(...);
typedef int (*autohelper_fn_ptr)(...);
typedef int (*autohelper_fn_ptr)(...);
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typedef int (*autohelper_fn_ptr)(...);
typedef int (*autohelper_fn_ptr)(...);

struct { void (*mapping)(...); } SyntaxElement;
struct { SyntaxElement MB_SyntaxElements[1200]; } *img;
int writeMBLayer (int rdopt) {
   SyntaxElement *currSE = &img->MB_SyntaxElements[index];
   writeSyntaxElement_UVL(currSE, ...);
}
int writeSyntaxElement_UVL(SyntaxElement *se, ...) {
   se->mapping(se->value1, ...);
}
µCFI guarantees the UCT property regardless of large tables and cascading accesses, as it uses constraining data to get a unique target for each node, avoiding counter increase from the beginning.

5.2 Preventing attacks

We evaluate the effectiveness of µCFI at preventing real-world exploits, recently proposed advanced attacks, and synthesized attacks that bypass known defenses (including PittyPat).

We first collect 5 publicly available exploits against 4 vulnerable programs as listed in Table 4. ffmpeg is a popular multimedia framework for encoding and decoding videos and audios. It is vulnerable to two heap-based buffer overflow bugs, CVE-2016-10190 and CVE-2016-10191, which are exploitable to attackers to construct control-hijacking attacks. Php is the interpreter of the PHP language, while sudo is a utility program on Unix-like systems for users to run programs with the privilege of other users. Both of them are vulnerable to format string vulnerabilities, i.e, CVE-2015-8617 for php and CVE-2012-0809 for sudo. As this type of vulnerability is highly exploitable, attackers simply launch control-hijacking attacks by corrupting code pointers. Nginx web server has a stack-based buffer overflow (CVE-2013-2028). We modify the exploit from [21] to carefully overwrite return addresses with their original values, and finally corrupt a sensitive structure pointer on the stack to launch forward-edge attacks. µCFI successfully detects all these CFI violations and halts their executions.

We also apply µCFI to protect the program introduced in PittyPat [21] that is vulnerable to COOP attack [55]. COOP is a Turing-complete attack method via fake object construction. As it corrupts forward-edge control-flow transfers to function entries, COOP poses a big challenge to coarse-grained CFIs. µCFI prevents COOP attacks by protecting all control data, which allows it to accurately track the function pointers in memory. When the program is fed a malicious input, µCFI successfully discriminates between legitimate and counterfeit objects to detect the attack.

At last, we evaluate µCFI on synthesized attacks that can bypass analysis without constraining data, like in PittyPat. We modify the source code of sjeng and gobmk to introduce two bugs, and build attacks to corrupt function pointers retrieved from large arrays. As we demonstrate in §2.2, existing CFI solutions cannot prevent such attacks because they overestimate all array elements as allowed targets. µCFI detects the inconsistency between the real target and the result of our analysis, and thus blocks both attacks.

5.3 Overhead measurement

Table 3 summarizes the overhead of µCFI in terms of execution time, peak memory use and compiled code size.

Performance overhead. On average, µCFI introduces 7.88% execution overhead to evaluated SPEC benchmarks. We break down the overhead to two components: that by instrumentation for efficient tracing and that by synchronization for CFI validation. As shown in the instru column under Time overhead in Table 3, code instrumentation leads to less than 3% overhead, while the monitor column shows that monitoring further increases overhead by 5.23%. The overall overhead can be less than the instrumentation overhead. We believe this is due to non-determinism like caching and paging. We also calculate the average overhead for SPEC by excluding benchmarks without any ICT instructions, specifically, milc, libquantum and lbm. The result shows that µCFI still performs efficiently, introducing 10.10% overhead.

For real-world applications, µCFI introduces 4.05% overhead to nginx, and 0.75% overhead to vsftpd for requesting 1K files. We also measure the request for larger files, and find the overhead is negligible. Requesting large files invokes more write system call, and thus triggers more synchronizations between the monitor and the protected execution. However, as there is no pending CFI checks between system calls, µCFI immediately resumes the execution. In fact, such heavy I/O operations amortize the instrumentation in the main program, and thus lead to less overhead.

µCFI has less overhead than PittyPat (17.9% for SPEC and 11.9% for nginx) for two reasons. First, enforcing the UCT property makes our analysis more efficient. For example, for an assignment operation, the analysis copies the target set from the source to the destination. µCFI only copies one target, whereas PittyPat has to copy a large set (e.g., 1200 targets in h264ref). Second, our method of path reconstruction avoids generating and parsing the TNT packets that predominate PT traces. Figure 8 compares the necessary packets for complete control-path construction (TNT, TIP) against our partial path construction (BBID, Return, c-data). The TNT packets account for over 90% of the whole PT trace in most cases. Our trace size is negligible in comparison.

µCFI introduces relatively higher overhead to some benchmarks, like 25% for h264ref and 50% for perlbench. We examine the code of h264ref and find that it performs a large number of indirect function calls within a small time window, which creates a burden on the kernel task processing the PT trace. We can address this problem by allocating more kernel tasks for PT parsing, or moving our analysis into the kernel space, like in Griffin [23]. Overhead on perlbench mainly comes from two aspects: high percentage of sensitive instructions and frequent forking of child processes. About
20% of perfbench instructions are considered sensitive and half of basic blocks are instrumented for dumping their BBIDs. Further, perfbench creates 66 child processes with the heavy fork system call, which triggers the monitor forks in the same way, thus slowing down the execution. We can reduce the overhead as follows.

**Optimization opportunity.** We identify a promising direction to reduce our overhead with the new hardware feature — the PTWrite instruction from Intel PT. The PTWrite instruction directly writes user-provided data as a TIP packet into the PT trace. μCFI can utilize this instruction to log BBID and constraining data. Compared to our write_data function which contains a bunch of instructions, PTWrite is more compact and thus more efficient. With this instruction, we can significantly reduce the performance overhead.

**Memory overhead.** We measure the memory usage of the protected program and present the results in the Memory Ovrhd column of Table 3. At 0.81%, the memory increase for SPEC benchmarks is negligible. For nginx and vsftpd, μCFI introduces less than 6% overhead. Considering the large amount of memory on contemporary devices, such increase is acceptable.

**Code overhead.** μCFI compiler introduces extra code into the protected binary, including a fixed-size part and a program-dependent part. The fixed part contains functions for data collection and trace reduction, which is the same for any program. We allocate about 4MB for the fixed part to support logging constraining data in the range of [-1024, 4M-1024]. Considering the large code base in modern programs (e.g., browsers) and advanced memory sharing techniques (e.g., memory deduplication [29, 41]), this size overhead is acceptable. Another part of the overhead comes from the instrumented calls and return redirection, and is shown in the vCode Ovrhd column of Table 3. μCFI introduces little code overhead in this part for most SPEC benchmarks (4.04% on average). For perfbench, the code size overhead is 32.13%. The reason is that half of its basic blocks contain sensitive instructions and thus are instrumented with extra calls to write_data to record their BBID.

5.4 Compatibility with shadow stack

We measure the compatibility of μCFI with integrated parallel shadow stack (PSS) protection. We compile each program with the μCFI compiler and PSS and measure the execution correctness and performance overhead. All test programs including SPEC benchmarks, nginx, and vsftpd, work well with benign inputs, demonstrating the strong compatibility of μCFI. The overhead of integrating PSS is shown in the +stack column in Table 3. On average, PSS introduces a 2.07% overhead to evaluated SPEC benchmarks and negligible overhead to nginx and vsftpd. Although parallel shadow stack works well with μCFI, we do not claim any contribution nor provide any guarantee on backward-edge CFI. By showing the compatibility of μCFI with shadow stacks, we clarify that any alternative solutions with various security guarantees, like randomization-based SafeStack [36] and hardware-based Intel CET technique [33], can be integrated with μCFI to provide UCT property on both directions.

6 DISCUSSION & FUTURE WORK

In this section, we discuss several important topics regarding Intel PT and μCFI. First, we analyze the security guarantee of μCFI and the attacks it can prevent. Then we compare μCFI with a closely related work, code-pointer integrity (CPI) [36]. Next we present the data-loss problem of Intel PT, and discuss the missed SPEC benchmarks due to data-loss. At last, we list the future work of handling the less common but challenging ICTs, like exceptions.

6.1 Security promise by μCFI.

As μCFI monitor asynchronously checks the target of each ICT instruction after its execution, it is possible that the attack has been launched for a while before we detect it. However, μCFI still provides a strong security guarantee as follows. First, attackers cannot make significant damage through security-critical system calls. μCFI synchronizes the monitor and the protected execution before the latter enters the high-privileged kernel space through security-critical system calls. The synchronization temporarily pauses the protected execution until the monitor finishes all CFI checks. Therefore, the monitor verifies the targets of all executed ICT instructions, and detects any individual unexpected behavior.

Second, attackers cannot clean its attack trace to bypass detection. Intel PT logs each ICT target (including the corrupted one) into the kernel space immediately after the instruction’s execution. Without invoking security-critical system calls, attackers cannot touch the PT trace. But once they invoke such system calls, the monitor pauses the execution before entering kernel, checks all executed ICT instructions with the clean PT trace and detects the attack.

At last, attackers cannot overflow PT trace in kernel to bypass detection. A smart attacker may keep running ICT instructions in user-space to generate a huge number of PT packets, aiming to overflow the PT trace. However, this attack does not work on μCFI. We set a limit of kernel memory used for PT trace. Once the limit is hit, μCFI suspends the protected execution until the monitor completes the checking phase and creates new memory quota. Since the normal execution usually does not trigger the limit, we treat frequent limit hit as a hint of attack.

6.2 Security analysis and CPI

Whether μCFI can prevent a concrete attack depends on the type of the attack-corrupted data. Specifically, (1) attacks corrupting code addresses (i.e., return address and function pointer) can be detected and blocked. (2) Attacks corrupting data with no relationship to control-flow can survive. In the case when the corrupted data indirectly affects the control-flow, μCFI can detect the attack if (3) the corrupted data is a pointer that affects the control-flow; (4) otherwise, μCFI cannot detect it. For example, μCFI cannot detect non-control-attacks [14, 56] because they fall into either case (2), such as corrupting the user identity variable; or case (4), such as corrupting the authenticated flag. For real-world control-hijacking attacks, like the ones in §5.2, which fall into either case (1) or (3), μCFI can detect and block them.

μCFI prevents the same set of attacks as code-pointer integrity, which enforces memory safety on control-data to prevent corruption in the first place. Both works protect the same set of program data, i.e., the sensitive pointer in CPI, and the union of the sensitive
6.3 Reliability of Intel PT

Intel PT has been explored in several works [21, 23, 28] to improve control-flow integrity. However, we find that PT packets can be lost at the hardware level. Specifically, some packets are dropped from the PT trace, even if the software driver faithfully copies every bit from the hardware buffer. This problem is more severe if one program generates a large number of PT packets within a short time window. As μCFI requires all necessary PT packets shown in their generation order to reconstruct the control flow, any data-loss renders our protection fail due to missed operations. Originally, we find this problem in almost all SPEC benchmarks, in which we generate traces to include all types of packets.

We inspect this problem and identify that TNT packets, which usually dominate the PT trace, contribute the most to the data-loss problem. Therefore, we mitigate this problem with novel encoding techniques to circumvent TNT packets and some others, as we discuss in §4. Finally, we did not see any packet loss for evaluated SPEC programs and real-world applications. However, data-loss problem still exists for some SPEC programs, especially for C++ ones which keep generating a lot of PT packets, like xalancbmk. We have to skip these benchmarks in our evaluation.

We report the data-loss problem to the corresponding team in Intel. They acknowledge this problem, and express supportive attitude to use PT for security. We believe our work shows the promising security benefit from complete PT trace, and will help Intel accurately measure the value of fixing the data-loss problem. Although Intel does not provide a concrete plan of fix, we do observe that newer generations of Intel CPUs have fewer lost packets on the same workload. We will keep eyes on Intel’s progress of solving this problem, and expect a complete fix in the near future.

6.4 Unsupported benchmarks

We skip several SPEC benchmarks in our evaluation due to the data-loss problem, including gcc, dealII, povray, omnitpp and xalancbmk. We will evaluate μCFI on these benchmarks once Intel fixes the data-loss problem, or releases newer productions with minimal lost data. Among them, C++ benchmarks usually contain more sensitive data due to the C++ polymorphism, and are likely to have higher overhead with μCFI. Polymorphism introduces a pointer of one function pointer table to each object, which is considered as sensitive data in μCFI. Therefore, μCFI executes more instructions in the monitor to capture all valid operations on control-data to enforce the UCT property.

However, we believe the performance number of μCFI on these benchmarks will be better than that reported in PittyPat, and will be more efficient than existing memory safety solutions. As we discuss in §5.3, μCFI takes the same structure as PittyPat to perform online point-to-analysis, but with significantly less PT packets and accurate (unique) target for each control data (shown in Figure 8). Therefore, the enforcement by μCFI is more lightweight and robust. μCFI also performs better than existing memory safety solutions. For example, Softbound [42], the commonly referred memory safety solution, introduces about 250% overhead to the benchmark h264ref, while μCFI only introduces 25% slow down. For benchmark sjeng, the overhead is about 80% for Softbound, while only about 18% for μCFI. Therefore, we strongly believe even in our missed benchmarks, μCFI is likely to be efficient than existing memory safety solutions.

6.5 Future work

A common challenge for CFI systems is validating control-flow changes caused by signals [9] and exceptions [55]. Considering that signal handling and exception handling are OS-dependent, we leave them as future work. μCFI can be extended to handle these cases, as Intel PT by default records the targets of signals and exceptions in FUP packets. We can label the structures used to register and store handler data as constraining data, and record them with our technique for arbitrary data collection. In the monitor, we can save these data structures, and use them to check with the FUP packets to validate the control-flow transfers caused by signals and exceptions.

Another challenge for CFI systems is validating the edges in dynamically loaded code (e.g., shared libraries). Other works address this problem using modular CFI [46, 47]. We choose to focus on protecting the main binary in μCFI, and model a set of well-known library functions to guarantee the correctness of the points-to-analysis, like memcpy and malloc. Our techniques also apply to libraries, and we leave the stitching of our models at runtime to future work.

7 RELATED WORK

Control-flow attacks are the predominant method to exploit memory errors. The attack method has evolved from code injection to code reuse, in which code snippets in the victim program are chained to achieve expressive attacks, like ret2libc [45] and return-oriented programming (ROP) [7–9, 13, 56, 57]. Researchers have proposed randomization techniques to mitigate code-reuse attacks [4, 5, 16, 19, 39, 40, 64]. For example, address space layout randomization (ASLR) is widely deployed in modern operating systems [51]. However, recent works [26, 27, 49] demonstrate that randomization-based solutions have inherent weaknesses and can still be bypassed. CFI is a principled solution to prevent control-hijacking attacks [1]. The idea is to statically draw a control-flow graph (CFG) to define all legitimate control-flow transfers and dynamically check the execution against the CFG. μCFI follows the idea of CFI, and proposes online points-to-analysis with full execution context to achieve the strongest CFI enforcement.

Coarse-grained CFI solutions, like CCFIR [68] and BinCFI [69], achieve strong compatibility and good performance, but fail to provide strong security guarantee to eliminate all control-hijacking attacks [10, 25, 55]. Fine-grained CFI, like type-based CFI [46, 59,
62], significantly reduces the number of allowed targets. However, none of them can guarantee the UCT property, due to the missing execution context. Our system µCFI is the first work that guarantees the UCT property while introducing small performance overhead.

Several hardware features are used to provide efficient CFI enforcement, like branch tracing store [65], and last branch record [15, 50]. However, following works [11, 25] have demonstrated attacks against these efficient CFI solutions. Recent works [23, 28] use PT to record the complete execution path and validate the ICT with a static control-flow graph. However, these solutions are best-effort and over-approximate the set of valid targets due to the limitation of static analysis. PTTYPAT [21] performs online points-to analysis using the PT trace, but fails to enforce the UCT property due to the missing constraining data. µCFI utilizes full execution context to perform the points-to-analysis, and thus is able to get the unique code target for each invocation of each ICT instruction.

Memory safety detects memory errors at runtime and thus prevents subsequent exploitation. Spatial memory safety guarantees that each memory access is within the expected boundary and prevents errors like buffer overflow and NULL-pointer dereference [3, 35, 42, 44, 67], while temporal memory safety detects access violations due to incorrect memory release and re-use, like user-after-free [18, 37, 60, 66]. Unfortunately, memory safety solutions introduce high overhead (usually over 100%) and make runtime hardening impractical. µCFI is a lightweight solution focusing on control data for better performance.

8 CONCLUSION

In this paper, we present the Unique Code Target (UCT) property for CFI, which guarantees that for each invocation of any indirect control-transfer instruction, there is one and only one allowed target. A CFI implementation enforcing the UCT property can stop all control-flow hijacking attacks that compromise control data. We prototype the first CFI system that satisfies the UCT property. Our system, µCFI, combines static program instrumentation with online points-to analysis to infer the unique code target. The evaluation shows that µCFI successfully enforces the UCT property for all protected programs, and stops real-world and advanced control-hijacking attacks while incurring less than 10% overhead.

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REFERENCES

A FORMAL RESULTS
In this section, we formally express and prove the correctness of our approach. In particular, we define the syntax (§A.1) and semantics (§A.2) of a core low-level language that we use to define our approach. We then formally define the problem that we address (§A.3) and our mechanism for protecting control security (§A.4).

A.1 Syntax

Figure 9 contains the syntax of a space of program instructions, Instrs. Instrs is defined over a space of disjoint sets of data registers RegsD, code-pointer registers RegsC, and data-pointer registers RegsP. An instruction may operate over data values (Equation 1), set a value as an offset for pointer arithmetic (Equation 2), load data from memory to a register (Equation 3), store data in a register to memory (Equation 4), branch to the address in a code pointer (Equation 5), load a code pointer from memory into a register (Equation 6), store a code pointer in a register to memory (Equation 7),
compute a data pointer by adding a data pointer to an integer offset (Equation 8), allocate a memory object with size in a given data register (Equation 9), load a data pointer from memory into a register, or store a data pointer in a register to memory (Equation 11). Although all arithmetic operations are assumed to be binary, when convenient we will depict operations as using fewer registers.

A program is a map from instruction addresses to instructions. That is, for space of instruction addresses Addrs, a designated initial address \( i \in \text{Addrs} \), the language of programs is \( \text{Lang} = \text{Addrs} \rightarrow \text{Instrs} \).

Instrs does not contain instructions similar to those in an architecture with a complex instruction-set, which may, e.g., perform operations directly on memory or call to and return from a procedure. The design of \( \mu \text{CFI} \) directly generalizes to analyze programs that use such an instruction set. In particular, the actual implementation of \( \mu \text{CFI} \) monitors programs compiled for the x86 architecture.

### A.2 Semantics

Each program \( P \in \text{Lang} \) defines a language of sequences of program states, called runs, that are generated by executing a sequence of instructions in \( P \) from an initial state. A state is a frame that binds registers to values, paired with a heap that maps data addresses to values. Let Words be a space of data words, let Objs be a space of data objects. A data address is a data object paired with an integer offset; i.e., the space of data addresses is denoted \( \text{Addrs} \rightarrow \text{Objs} \times \text{Words} \).

A data frame is a map from data registers to words paired with an offset value; i.e., the space of data-register frames is denoted \( \text{Frame} \rightarrow (\text{Words} \rightarrow \text{Words}) \times \text{Words} \).

A heap is a pair consisting of (1) a map \( s : \text{Objs} \rightarrow \mathbb{Z} \) from each object to its size and (2) a map \( m : \text{Addrs} \rightarrow \text{Values} \) that for each \( o \in \text{Objs} \) and \( i \in \mathbb{Z} \) with \( 0 \leq i < s(o) \), maps address \( (o,i) \) to some value. The space of all heaps is denoted \( \text{Heaps} \).

A state is a tuple consisting of (1) the address of the current instruction, (2) a data frame, (3) a code-pointer frame, (4) a data-pointer frame, and (5) a heap. The space of states is denoted \( \text{States} \).

Each instruction in Instrs implements a transition function \( \tau \) that maps each pre-state and instruction to the resulting post-state. The definition of \( \tau \) is standard and is thus omitted in order to simplify the presentation; the instructions that refer to symbol offset update and use the offset value in the data frame of the current state. For each program \( P \in \text{Lang} \) and sequence of states \( r \) such that each pair of adjacent states in \( r \) are in the transition relation of a corresponding instruction in \( P \), \( r \) is a run of \( P \).

The runs of \( P \) are denoted \( \text{Runs}(P) \).

### A.3 Problem definition

In this section, we define the problem that we address in this work in formal detail. We first define spaces of program instrumenters and precise monitors, and then define conditions under which they are valid control-security monitors.

A procedure that, given a program, generates another program is a program instrumenter; i.e., the space of all program instrumenters is denoted \( \text{Instrumets} = \text{Lang} \rightarrow \text{Lang} \).

A program and sequence of instruction addresses, outputs an instruction address is a control monitor; i.e., the space of control monitors is denoted \( \text{Mons} = \text{Lang} \times \text{Addrs} \rightarrow \text{Addrs} \).

The control trace of a run \( r \) is the sequence of targets of indirect branches taken by \( r \). Our formal definition of a valid control monitor is expressed in terms of the code addresses visited over program runs and conditions under which one run of program simulates a run of another program.

A run \( r \) is simulated by a run \( r' \) if for each state in \( r \), there is a corresponding state in \( r' \) that maintains all state of \( r \), and may optionally maintain additional state. Let \( r \) be a sequence of states \( q_0, q_1, \ldots, q_n \) in \( \text{States} \). For \( P' \in \text{Lang} \), let \( r' \in \text{Runs}(P') \) be a concatenation of \( n \) non-empty subsequences of states such that for each \( 0 \leq i < n \) and each state \( q' \) in the \( i \)th subsequence, \( q' \) has the data-register frame, code-pointer frame, and data-pointer frames of \( q_i \) over all registers bound in \( q_i \). Our work is intended to be applied in a security context in which one may both instrument a program before it is run and monitor the control branches taken by the instrumented program.

### Definition 1

Let \( P \in \text{Lang} \), \( r \in \text{Runs}(P) \), \( q \in \text{States} \) be such that \( r \cdot q \in \text{Runs}(P) \), and let \( a \in \text{Addrs} \) be such that \( \text{Trace}(r \cdot q) = \text{Trace}(r) \cdot a \). Let \( I \in \text{Instrumets} \) and \( M \in \text{Mons} \) be such that there is some \( r' \in \text{Runs}(I(P)) \) such that \( (1) r \sim r' \); (2) \( M(\text{Trace}(r')) = a \). Then \( I \) and \( M \) are a valid control framework for \( P \) and \( r \cdot q \).

The definition of a valid control framework ensures that any framework that exists is precise. In particular, because each control...
monitor is a function, each monitor in a framework, given a control trace of a program, may output only a single code address that may be the valid target of the monitored program’s not indirect branch. Such a definition is not satisfied by previous approaches to online control-security enforcement, such as PottyPat [21]. Such approaches, after reading a control trace, may potentially allow any control target from a non-singular set. Thus, the analysis cannot implement a function from each trace to a single control target allowed next.

The problem that we address in this work is to develop a valid control framework for each program and its runs. To address this problem, we define a program instrumenter Instrumenter (§A.4.1) and a program monitor Monitor (§A.4.2) such that Instrumenter and Monitor are valid control framework for each program and each of its runs.

A.4 Protecting control security

In this section, we formally define a program instrumenter (§A.4.1) and program monitor (§A.4.2).

A.4.1 Program instrumentation. Instrumenter, given a program $P$, generates a program $P'$ such that each offset used to compute a pointer in $P$ determines the target of an indirect branch in $P'$. $P'$ uses two code registers that we assume, without loss of generality, are not used by $P$, namely offsetTgt and nextInstr. $P'$ also contains a region of code starting at a fixed address offsetCode; the size of the region is the maximum value of a data word, denoted |Words|. The range of instruction addresses between offsetCode and offsetCode + |Words| is called the offset-code region. Each instruction in the code region is a noop, except for the final instruction, which indirectly branches to the code address stored in nextInstr. $P'$ is an instrumentation of $P$ that, before each instruction that performs pointer arithmetic, translates the offset used to compute the new pointer to a corresponding indirect branch. Let $p, q \in \text{Regs}_P$ be such that $q := p \oplus \text{offset} \in P$. $P'$ includes the following additional instructions immediately before $p$:

2. An instruction that binds the address of the next instruction to nextInstr: nextInstr := ip + 1.
3. An instruction that transfers control to the instruction at offsetTgt: br offsetTgt.

Instrumenter is a valid program instrumenter: given a program $P$, Instrumenter generates a program that simulates each run of $P$.

Lemma 1. For each $P \in \text{Lang}$ and $r \in \text{Runs}(P)$, there is some $r' \in \text{Runs}(\text{Instrumenter}(P))$ such that $r \sim r'$.

Proof. Proof by induction on $r$. For the base case, $r$ is an initial state $\sigma$, which is a data frame paired with an empty heap. $\sigma$ is also an initial state of Instrumenter($P$). Thus $r$ is a run of Instrumenter($P$) such that $r \sim r$.

For the inductive case, $r$ is a initial run $s$, followed by states $\sigma$ and $\sigma'$. By the inductive hypothesis, $s \cdot \sigma$ is simulated by some $s' \in \text{Runs}(\text{Instrumenter}(P))$. The instruction $i \in \text{Instrs}$ on which $\sigma$ transitions to $\sigma'$ may have one of the following forms. If $i$ is any instruction other than one that performs pointer arithmetic, then $s' \cdot \sigma'$ is in Runs(Instrumenter($P$)) and $s \cdot \sigma \cdot \sigma' \sim s' \cdot \sigma'$. Otherwise, if $i$ performs pointer arithmetic, then from $\sigma$, Instrumenter($P$) steps through a bounded sequence of states $\Sigma$ with instruction addresses in the offset-code region, and then the state $\sigma' \cdot s \cdot \Sigma$ is in Runs(Instrumenter($P$)) and $s \cdot \sigma \cdot \sigma' \sim s' \cdot \Sigma$.

The key idea behind our approach is to monitor programs in a specific form that reflect values used in pointer arithmetic as targets of control branches. In particular, if each instruction that performs pointer arithmetic in each run of program $P$ is preceded by an instruction that branches to a target that encodes that offsets the then, we say that $P$ reflects pointer-arithmetic offsets.

Definition 2. Let $P \in \text{Lang}$ be such that for each $r \in \text{Runs}(P)$ and each $\sigma \in r$ that steps using an instruction that performs pointer arithmetic, there is some $\sigma' \in r$ before $\sigma$ and $c \in \text{Regs}_C$ such that $\sigma'$ steps on instruction br $c, \sigma(\text{offset}) = \sigma'(\text{offsetCode} + c)$, and there is no $\sigma'' \in r$ between $\sigma'$ and $\sigma$ and $d \in \text{Regs}_C$ such that $\sigma''$ steps on instruction br $d$ and offsetCode $\leq \sigma''(d) < \text{offsetCode} + |\text{Words}|$. Then $P$ reflects pointer-arithmetic offsets.

Instrumenter only generates programs that reflect pointer-arithmetic offsets.

Lemma 2. For each $P \in \text{Lang}$, Instrumenter($P$) reflects pointer-arithmetic offsets.

Lemma 2 follows directly from the definition of Instrumenter.

A.4.2 Control monitoring. Monitor, given a program $P$ and control trace $T$, outputs the only control target that may be taken next by a valid run of $P$ that has executed $T$. We now define the domain of information about program states maintained by Monitor (§A.4.2) and then define how domain information is updated by simulating each instruction executed by $P$ (§A.4.3).

Monitor States. Monitor maintains a code-pointer frame, data-pointer frame, and heap that soundly models the structure of data objects and code pointers in the $P'$ heap, while retaining no information about the data values in the heap. I.e., let the countably-infinite space of monitor objects (used by the monitor to model data objects allocated by the monitored program) be denoted Obj$_M$. Let a monitor address be a monitor object paired with an offset; i.e., the space of monitor addresses is denoted Addr$_M$ = Obj$_M$ × $\mathbb{Z}$. A monitor pointer frame binds data pointer to monitor addresses; i.e., the space of monitor pointer frames is denoted Frames$_M$ = Regs$_P$ → Addr$_M$. A monitor heap is a partial map from monitor addresses to code addresses and monitor address; i.e., the space of monitor heaps is denoted Heaps$_M$ = Addr$_M$ −→ Addr$_C$ ∪ Addr$_M$. A monitor state is a tuple $(a, o, C, D, H)$, where

1. The address $a \in$ Addr$_C$ of the current instruction.
2. The offset $o \in \mathbb{Z}$ to be used in the next pointer-arithmetic instruction.
3. The code-pointer frame $C \in$ Frames$_C$ (§A.2) of the monitored program.
4. A monitor-pointer frame $D \in$ Frames$_M$ (§A.2) isomorphic (as defined below) to the data-pointer frame of the monitored program.
5. A monitor heap $H \in$ Heaps$_M$ isomorphic (as defined below) to the heap of the monitored program.
The space of monitor states is denoted States_M.

Each monitor state represents an infinite set of program states with identical code-pointer frames and heapless heaps. Let Q ∈ Frames_p, Q’ ∈ Frames_M, H ∈ Heaps, H’ ∈ Heaps_M, and f : Obj ∋ Objs_M be such that (1) f is one-to-one, (2) for each p ∈ Regs_p, f(Q(p)) = Q’(p), (3) for each o ∈ Obj and i ∈ Z, if H(o,i) ∈ Addrs, then H’(o,i) = H’(f(o),i) and if H(o,i) ∈ Addrs_D, then f(H(o,i)) = H’(f(o),i). Then for a ∈ Addrs_C, D ∈ Frames_D, C ∈ Frames_C, state q = (a, D, C, Q, H) is object-abstracted by monitor state q’ = (a, D, C, Q’, H’), denoted q ≤O q’. If in addition, (q, offset) = q’(offset), then q is fully abstracted by q’, denoted q ≤ q’.

For each P ∈ Lang, the initial monitor state P_M ∈ States_M consists of the initial instruction pointer of P, a default offset value, the initial code-pointer and data-pointer frames, and an empty monitor heap. For each initial state σ ∈ States_P, σ ≤ P_M.

A.4.3 Interpretations of instructions over monitor states. Monitor, given P and a sequence of code addresses T, determines the sequence of instructions I that must be executed by any run of P that branches to the addresses in T in sequence. After reading the sequence, the monitor outputs the single valid control target of the next indirect branch of the monitored run.

To do so, Monitor models the effect of each instruction in I on the current state of P by appropriately updating a monitor state that it maintains. For a ∈ Addrs_C, o ∈ Z, C ∈ Frames_C, D ∈ Frames_M, and H ∈ Heaps_M, each monitor pre-state q = (a, o, C, D, H) and instruction i ∈ Instrs define a unique monitor post-state, as follows.

- Each instruction i that performs arithmetic on data, loads from memory, stores data to memory only updates the instruction address of q to be the address following i.
- For each c ∈ Regs_C, instruction br c updates the instruction address of the maintained monitor to be C(c). If the branch target is within the offset code region (i.e., if offsetCode ≤ C(c) < offsetCode + |Words|), then c is updated to be C(c) − offsetCode.
- For each c ∈ Regs_C and p ∈ Regs_p, instruction c := p updates C to bind c to H(p). Instruction *p := c updates H to map address H(D(p)) to C(c).
- For all p, q ∈ Regs_p and each x ∈ Regs_p, instruction p := q:x updates D to bind p to D(q) + x.
- For each x ∈ Regs_D, instruction p := alloc x updates D to bind a monitor object not in the domain of H to p.
- For all p, q ∈ Regs_p, instruction q := p updates D to bind q to H(D(p)). Instruction *q := p updates H to map H(D(q)) to D(p).

For each q ∈ States_M and i ∈ Instrs, the monitor state resulting from executing i on q is denoted T_M(q, i).

Interpretations of instructions over monitors preserve two key properties. First, the interpretation of each instruction preserves object abstraction.

Lemma 3. For each q ∈ States, q_M ∈ States_M such that q ≤O q_M, and i ∈ Instrs, it holds that τ(q, i) ≤O τ_M(q_M, i).

Proof. Proof by cases on the structure of i. The proof follows directly from the definition of object abstraction offsets and τ_M on i.

Second, interpretation of pointer arithmetic preserves full abstraction.

Lemma 4. For each q ∈ States, q_M ∈ States_M such that q ≤O q_M, p.q ∈ Regs_D, it holds that τ(q, i) ≤O τ_M(q_M, i), where i = p := q + offset.

Proof. The proof follows immediately from the definition of full abstraction and the interpretations of pointer arithmetic over concrete states and monitor states.

The fact that the transformer over monitor states soundly models the effect of each instruction supports the fact that the analysis monitor always soundly determines the unique next valid control-transfer target.

Lemma 5. Let P ∈ Lang be such that P reflects pointer-arithmetic offsets, r ∈ Runs_p, T ∈ Addrs_C, and a ∈ Addrs_C be such that Trace(r) = T · a. Then Monitor(T) = a.

Proof. Proof by induction on r. The key property established by induction on r is that after Monitor analyzes r with final state σ, monitor maintains a monitor state σ_M such that σ ≤O σ_M; if σ has the instruction pointer of an instruction that performs pointer arithmetic, then σ ≤ σ_M. For the base case, where r is a sequence consisting of only an initial state σ, the monitor state maintained by Monitor is i_M, and σ ≤ i_M.

For the inductive case, r is a sequence of states s, followed by states σ and then σ’. Monitor, given Trace(s · σ), maintains a monitor state σ_M such that σ ≤ σ_M by the inductive hypothesis. If σ has the instruction pointer of an instruction that does not perform pointer arithmetic, then for σ’_M = τ_M(σ, i) the monitor state maintained by Monitor, it holds that σ’ ≤O σ’_M by Lemma 3. Otherwise, if σ has the instruction pointer of an instruction i that performs pointer arithmetic, then s contains a step on a branch instruction into the offset code region, and the most recent such instruction branches to offsetCode + offset, by the assumption that P reflects pointer-arithmetic offsets. Thus the offset in σ_M is offset in σ, by the definition of τ_M for branch instructions. Thus σ’ ≤O σ’_M, by Lemma 4.

The property proved by induction, combined with the definition of object abstraction, entail that Monitor(T) = a.

The components of µCFI correctly enforce control security.

Theorem 1. For each P ∈ Lang and r ∈ Runs_p, the system (Instrumenter, Monitor) is a valid control framework.

Proof. The fact that (Instrumenter, Monitor) is a valid control framework follows directly from the definition of a valid control framework (Defn. 1), the fact that Instrumenter is a valid instrumenter (Lemma 1) that only generates programs that reflect pointer-arithmetic offsets (Lemma 2), and the fact that Monitor soundly determines each control target (Lemma 5).