

Memory Safety Bug Hunting with BAP

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1 Introduction

The Problem

Although numerous debugging tools have been developed for performing static and dynamic software analysis, the majority of these require access to source code or utilization of special compile-time flags to embed debug information within the output binary. In contrast, little effort has been spent on developing static binary analysis tools which can directly analyze off-the-shelf executables without executing them. For this project, we plan to focus on a subset of common programming bugs that tend to introduce security vulnerabilities, known as memory safety errors. Examples of these include buffer overflows, double frees, and uninitialized variables. In particular, we define *Security Outcomes* with respect to certain memory-safety errors, and subsequently implement and test static analyses that yield these outcomes. All analyses were written against our group’s Binary Analysis Platform (BAP)¹ [1, 3], and are available online ².

A factor of this research area that appeals to many is the ability to conclude whether vulnerabilities do or do not exist by performing an analysis purely on the binary level. Due to the inherent difficulties of operating at this level, our approach to the problem starts out coarse, and continues to be incrementally refined as we become more familiar with the numerous barriers that inhibit vulnerability detection in binaries. In this respect, we have much to say towards lessons learned in §5.

1.1 Approach Overview

Initially, we planned to implement and test the following static analyses with respect to our original proposal:

1. Intraprocedural data dependency resolution of instructions
2. Intraprocedural detection of unchecked memory allocations
3. Basic intraprocedural detection of buffer overflows in the stack
4. Basic intraprocedural detection of buffer overflows in the heap

¹<https://github.com/BinaryAnalysisPlatform/bap>

²<https://github.com/ddcc/15745-s15-project>

Equipped with the knowledge of data flow dependencies between instructions (1), we determined to reason about various properties of typical vulnerabilities that we could check (2-4). For example, we might like to follow how arguments to a ‘strcpy’ call are influenced by previous instructions as a function of the stack register.

1.2 Related Work

Engler et. al. found numerous bugs with system-specific static analyses, implemented by way of a meta-compilation language for the gcc compiler [5, 6]. Analyses are composed in the form of correctness rules, and these rules can be automatically inferred from source code. Memory errors that are checked include NULL pointer bugs, failure to verify return value of allocations, and uses of already-freed pointers. Similarly, we would ideally like to perform comparable memory safety analyses, except at the level of binary code. Whereas Engler’s work matured into a generic platform for specifying analyses, we must start first with an ad-hoc approach to gain insight and familiarity with the problem domain presented by binaries.

The Jakstab framework [7] provides a platform for analyzing binaries. However, it is not oriented toward detecting security vulnerabilities, but rather recovering abstractions from binaries (e.g., CFG reconstruction). Frama-C is an example of a framework which allows one to check various properties, including security properties, but works on the source level [4].

1.3 Contributions

Our key technical contributions are as follows:

1. A dataflow analysis framework for BAP.
2. General plugins for BAP that deliver
 - (a) reaching definitions, and
 - (b) data flow dependency resolution (use-def and def-use chains).
 - (c) registers corresponding to function call arguments and returns, according to the ARM ABI.
3. Security-specific plugins for BAP that produce security outcomes by checking
 - (a) whether memory allocation checks are performed on ‘memcpy’,
 - (b) whether calls such as strcpy are safe from buffer overflows under specific conditions, and
 - (c) whether access to heap-allocated memory is in-bounds.
4. Results of testing the aforementioned plugins on the GNU Coreutils³ software suite.

1.4 Structure

Due to the exploratory nature of this project on the binary level, we concentrated much of our efforts on examining various analysis approaches, rather than optimizing or improving the scope of a specific analysis. benchmarks.

³<https://www.gnu.org/software/coreutils/>

2 Approach

2.1 Overview

Here we discuss our approach towards ensuring security properties as it evolved over the course of the project. Initially, we decided to reason about each of the cases in §1.1 that relate to vulnerabilities (2-4). In order to do so, we needed some basic infrastructure (1), which will be described shortly. Afterwards, we describe our specific approach to performing security analyses with respect to our *Security Outcomes*.

2.2 The Case for Reaching Definitions

For example, consider the following code, for which we desire to verify that the return value of `malloc` is checked:

Listing 1: `malloc.c`

```
1 #include <stdlib.h>
2 #include <stdio.h>
3
4 int main() {
5     char *array = 0;
6
7     array = malloc(32 * sizeof(*array));
8
9     if (!array)
10        return -1;
11
12    free(array);
13
14    return 0;
15 }
```

The disassembly of this binary might appear as follows (with two basic blocks, before and after the call):

Listing 2: Malloc disassembly

```
begin(main_ENTRY)
    000082c8: 04 e0 2d e5    str lr, [sp, #-4]!
    000082cc: 20 00 a0 e3    mov r0, #0x20
    000082d0: 49 00 00 eb    bl #0x124          \; call malloc
end(main_ENTRY)

begin(main_0xc)
    000082d4: 00 00 50 e3    cmp r0, #0x0       \; check malloc return value
    000082d8: 02 00 00 0a    beq #0x8
end(main_0xc)
```

We would like to confirm that a check takes place after the call to `malloc`; i.e.; we want to check for the presence of a `cmp` instruction and the operand `r0` in `main_0xc`.

However, it may be the case that the contents of `r0` are first moved to another register, `r3`, which is subsequently checked by the `cmp` instruction. In order to detect an unchecked `malloc` return value, we must verify that there exists a flow of data from `r0` to other registers that is also unchecked. To obtain the statements where data from `r0` flows to, we make use of def-use chains. For the definition of `r0` in the BIL IR, we check all uses of `r0` and transitively look up the def-use chains for further registers, such as `r3`, which the value in `r0` flows to. On the final set of instructions, we verify that the data is subject to a `cmp` instruction.

This example demonstrates the need for def-use chains; our stack and heap based analyses in turn also require use-def chains. Due to backwards edges in the CFG, it is difficult to produce def-use chains given a single instruction. For this reason we first implemented a dataflow framework and a reaching-definitions pass. A more comprehensive description of the dataflow framework implementation, as written in OCaml for BAP, may be viewed in Appendix A. From the reaching definitions results, we generate def-use and use-def chains as necessary—e.g., we filter on those reaching definitions which concern a particular use or def of a register.

2.3 Data Flow Dependency

An extension to the def-use and use-def chains was to produce the data (flow) dependencies of a given statement in a forward or backward direction, respectively. Essentially, given a register in a definition (such as a `mov` instruction in the BIL IR), we can produce a set of all instructions that are determined to transitively affect its value. We implement this by way of a data dependency plugin for BAP. Consider the arguments to the following `strcpy` call:

Listing 3: `strcpy.c`

```
#include <stdio.h>
#include <string.h>

int main(int argc, char** argv) {
    char dst[10] = {0};
    strcpy(dst, argv[1]);
}
```

For the `dst` variable on the stack, encoded as an `<address,statement>` pair, we have:

```
<(0x8490:32, 0)> R0 := R2
```

The plugin will determine all preceding instructions it is dependent on:

```
<(0x8444:32, 3)> SP := SP - 0x8:32
<(0x8448:32, 2)> R11 := SP + 0x4:32
<(0x848C:32, 2)> R2 := R11 - 0x10:32
```

Now, we can observe the role that the stack pointer `SP` plays when considering `dst`. A full listing of the BIL disassembly, the data dependencies for `argv[1]`, and a graphical output may be viewed in the Appendix B.

2.4 malloc Checking Security Outcomes

For `malloc` checking, we suppose that a security program should always check the return value of `malloc`. This is a strong yet reasonable requirement for ensuring secure code, because if the pointer fails to be assigned a value due to a lack of space for allocation, an attacker may be able to exploit a `NULL` pointer dereference at a later point in the program.

To demonstrate how our plugin check works, observe the example shown in 2.2. In this example, the function `malloc` is called at address `0x82d0`. Followed by the instruction, we have a comparison instruction which compare the return value `r0` to constant value `0`. This piece of code is thus a candidate for `malloc` checking.

Note that the comparison instruction is not necessarily available immediately after the `malloc` call instruction. Also, a more complicated case could be that the return value is passed to another register which in turn is checked instead of `r0`.

Another example that we came across is from binary coreutils_01_0, which is shown below:

Listing 4: Malloc disassembly

```

d4d0:      e0800009      add     r0, r0, r9
d4d4:      e280a002      add     s1, r0, 2
d4d8:      e2800003      add     r0, r0, 3
d4dc:      ebffee80      bl      8ee4 <malloc@plt>      \;
d4e0:      e1a08000      mov     r8, r0                  \*
d4e4:      ea000006      b       d504 <locale_charset+0x208>
d4e8:      e0891000      add     r1, r9, r0
d4ec:      e081100a      add     r1, r1, s1
d4f0:      e281a002      add     s1, r1, 2
d4f4:      e1a00004      mov     r0, r4
d4f8:      e2811003      add     r1, r1, 3
d4fc:      ebffee4b      bl      8e30 <realloc@plt>
d500:      e1a08000      mov     r8, r0
d504:      e3580000      cmp     r8, 0                  \;
d508:      1a000005      bne     d524 <locale_charset+0x228> \;
d50c:      e1a00004      mov     r0, r4

```

In this example, after calling malloc at address d4dc, the program copies the return value to register r8, and then to address d504 where it compares the value of r8 to constant 0. The reason of compiling the program in such way is mainly because of optimization. Specifically, this helps decreasing the redundant code, by reusing d504: cmp r8, 0 and the subsequent instructions.

To address this problem, we use the forward-data-deps plugin to help finding the instructions that depends on the return value. Here dependence means that one or more variables used in the instruction depends on register r0. For example, given instruction d4e0: mov r8, r0, we find that instruction d504: cmp r8, 0 depends on r0, because the value of r8 is from r0. Also, instruction d508 depends on r0, because the flag registers are determined by the d504, and in d504 r8 depends on r0.

Looking back to the example, and using forward-data-deps plugin, we get all dependence instructions once we find a move instruction with r0 as source. For In the next step, we check if there is cmp instruction among all instructions we found. If there is one, we consider call is safe. If not, we consider the call unsafe.

2.5 Stack-based Security Outcomes

A number of unfruitful approaches as documented in §5 lead us to opting for an approach where we identify two properties which are important from a security perspective, without inferring sizes of stack-based buffers.

src is a constant If we can determine that the **src** buffer is a constant, (and therefore not dependent on any user input), the **strcpy** call is safe. While a good property to check, it was found that a constant value corresponding to the **src** argument didn't occur in practice. Depending on compiler optimizations **strcpy** (as well as **sprintf** calls) would be compiled to a LDMIA.W ARM instruction which directly copies memory. Lastly, we observed that **strcpy** and **sprintf** may be replaced by the **__strcpy_chk** and **__sprintf_chk** counterparts, which are less interesting to analyze from a security standpoint.

Nevertheless, we implemented a partial check of this case in the plugin, and assumed the standpoint that any **src** address originating from the **ro.data** section implies a constant, fixed value. However, for this check we only consider the statement which loads a value immediately before the call, and not originating previous statements.

Stack accesses within the frame For this outcome, we confirm that all instructions which access elements on the stack, plus a fixed offset, are within the stack range of a function. We infer the size of the frame by considering the statements that manipulate SP in the function prologue. While we didn't observe any cases where the stack range was exceeded, this type of check forms the basis for further, more sophisticated improvements.

2.6 Heap-based Security Outcomes

Another common memory safety problem is reading or writing to memory exceeding an allocated buffer; in certain situations, these buffer overflows are remotely exploitable and can be leveraged by an attacker to take control of a given program. As a result, we decided to implement a basic heap check plugin for the Binary Analysis Platform (BAP) that is capable of identifying and warning when static program execution violates heap safety.

Another common memory safety problem is reading or writing to memory. The below example program, known as **doublefree**, suffers from a number of common memory safety problems. Among these is an out of bounds array write to the **array** variable, demonstrating a common off-by-one error that exceeds the allocated buffer size by one byte. Additionally, this program also exemplifies a number of other memory safety issues that we have developed BAP plugins to detect, including a missing return value check for the call to **malloc**.

Listing 5: malloc-free.c

```

1  #include <stdlib.h>
2  #include <stdio.h>
3
4  int main() {
5      char *array;
6      printf( " Hello World!\ n  ");
7
8      // Use of uninitialized memory
9      printf("Pointer: %p\n", array);
10
11     // Missing check against NULL return value
12     array = malloc(32 * sizeof(*array));
13
14     // Out of bounds array access
15     array[32] = 0;
16
17     // Double free
18     free(array);
19     free(array);
20
21     return 0;
22 }
```

At the most basic level, the **heap_check** plugin functions by searching for calls to external library functions responsible for performing memory allocation such as **malloc**, **xmalloc**, **calloc**, etc. Then, it queries the BAP ABI interface to determine the number of arguments passed to the library function, and the register that contains the return value. Template matching is used to identify the specific argument that contains the allocation size, since the former two functions take only one argument, whereas the latter takes two arguments, with the allocation size passed in the second argument.

At this point, the program searches backwards through the function from the callsite for the most recent definition of the register that contains the allocation size, and analyses this definition to determine if it can statically identify a constant allocation size. If this is the case, then the plugin tags this allocation callsite with the size of the allocation, and proceeds to the next allocation

callsite. If it cannot statically determine the allocation size, then the program currently tags the allocation callsite with an allocation size `MAX_INT`, essentially performing widening to the supremum of the semilattice.

Next, after identifying and tagging all of the memory allocation callsites, the plugin iterates through each of the callsites, and attempts to statically identify all possible uses of the return value register that involve a memory operation (e.g. `LDR` and `STR` assembly instructions). For each of these uses, the plugin identifies the register that contains the memory address, searches backwards from the memory instruction for the most recent definition of this register, and statically attempts to determine the register offset from the allocation site. This process is similar to that performed above for determining the size of a memory allocation.

Finally, if the program was able to statically identify both the memory allocation size and the memory operation offset, the program compares the two values to ensure that the operation is less than the allocation size. If this is not the case, the program emits a warning about this unsafe memory operation, otherwise it labels the operation safe and proceeds to the next use.

Since the current BAP framework lacks a number of memory optimizations that would simplify analysis, this plugin currently only performs a basic level of memory operation checking. In particular, it currently only analyzes memory write operations, and is restricted to simple memory offset computations that only involve addition. As a result, it cannot perform analysis on loop operations or complex assembly sequences in which the pointer to the memory allocation is stored into memory or selectively modified through indirect control flow. Nevertheless, the current plugin is capable of identifying memory safety vulnerabilities for the example program shown above, as shown below.

```
0x8330:32: .init_proc ([832c, 8333]) -> call_weak_fn ([83dc, 83f3])
0x83c8:32: _start ([83a0, 83cb]) -> __libc_start_main ([837c, 8387])
0x83cc:32: _start ([83cc, 83cf]) -> abort ([8394, 839f])
0x83f4:32: call_weak_fn ([83f4, 83f7]) -> __gmon_start__ ([8388, 8393])
0x848c:32: __do_global_ctors_aux ([848c, 848f]) -> deregister_tm_clones ([8400, 8417])
0x84c8:32: frame_dummy ([84c4, 84cb]) -> register_tm_clones ([8438, 8457])
0x84e4:32: main ([84d4, 84e7]) -> puts ([8364, 836f])
0x84f0:32: main ([84e8, 84f3]) -> printf ([834c, 8357])
0x84f8:32: main ([84f4, 84fb]) -> malloc ([8370, 837b])
>> 0x84f8:32: malloc (0x20:32)
0x8518:32: main ([84fc, 851b]) -> free ([8358, 8363])
0x8520:32: main ([851c, 8523]) -> free ([8358, 8363])
>> 0x84fc:32: R3 = R0
>> 0x8508:32: R3 = R3 + 0x20:32
>> 0x8510:32: R3 + 0x0:32 <- t_1605 (UNSAFE: 0x20:32 <= 0x20:32)
0x8560:32: __libc_csu_init ([853c, 8563]) -> .init_proc ([832c, 8333])
```

The above plugin output identifies addresses at which calls were made from one function to another using the `->` (arrow) symbol, labeling both the source and destination function with their symbol name and relevant basic blocks. Then, for each memory allocation callsite, the program attempts to statically determine the allocation size, shown above with the `malloc (0x20:32)` syntax. Subsequently, the program attempts to statically determine the use of each allocation site, the offset of the memory operation, and the actual memory operation, which are respectively shown above by the movement of memory allocation pointer from `R0` (the return value of `malloc`) to `R3`, the increment of register `R3` by `0x20:32`, and the storage of temporary variable `t_1605` (containing the value 0 loaded from `R2`) into `R3`. At the point, the plugin identifies that memory operation offset exceeds the size of the allocation site, and emits a warning that the operation is unsafe (`UNSAFE: 0x20L32 <= 0x20:32`).

Note that the `:32` label indicates that the respective memory address is 32-bit.

3 Experimental Setup

Our experimental setup consisted of running our plugins with BAP 0.9.6 [1] on a set of binaries, including GNU `Coreutils` and our own examples.

3.1 Unchecked Malloc

In this experiment, we checked the following property for all arm `Coreutils` binaries:

- after a call instruction with target `malloc`, the return value must be checked.
- if the return value is checked to be zero, there must be a conditional jump followed to deal with the zero case.
- the return value of `malloc` can be passed to other registers. If so, checking other register with the return value should be also valid.

3.2 Stack Check Plugin

The stack check plugin was tested against the GNU `Coreutils` suite. We primarily chose the `Coreutils` suite since a) it can be compiled for ARM, and b) it contains numerous calls to `strcpy`, `memcpy`, `malloc`, and so forth. The stack check plugin, while configurable, concretely checked for function calls to:

- `strcat`
- `strcpy`
- `strncpy`
- `memcpy`

The plugin collected a number of statistics on the binaries, including the number of argument sites (that is, statements that set up registers before a call), the number of functions which contained calls to ‘dangerous’ functions, and the maximum number of statements on which an argument site statement was dependent. These are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 3.2 presents the total number of statements in a binary which affect unique argument sites.

The figures illustrate some interesting properties with respect to argument sites and data dependencies. Consider that each potentially dangerous function takes 2 or 3 parameters—of these, our data dependency plugin determined the maximum number of statements a single argument site statement is dependent on. We observe from Figure 1 that this could number in the hundreds, whereas the total number could range in the thousands (Figure 3.2). The implication here is that any additional reasoning and refinement to static analysis methods across cases composed of sizable dependencies need to be carefully considered. For instance, if we add forms of pointer analysis, we may speculate about the scale of complexity of memory operations for argument sites.

We did not observe any violations with respect to the security outcomes in §2.5. This is perhaps unsurprising, given the ubiquitous use of the `Coreutils` suite. At the same time, it is difficult to choose a test suite which purposefully exhibits the stack properties that we check; see §5 for further discussion.

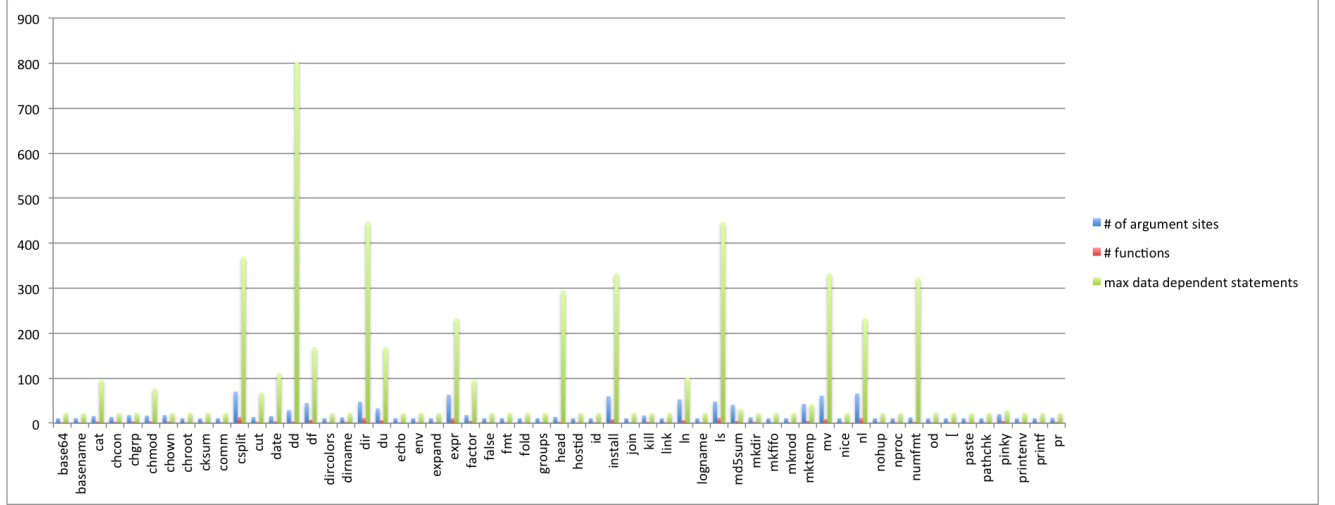
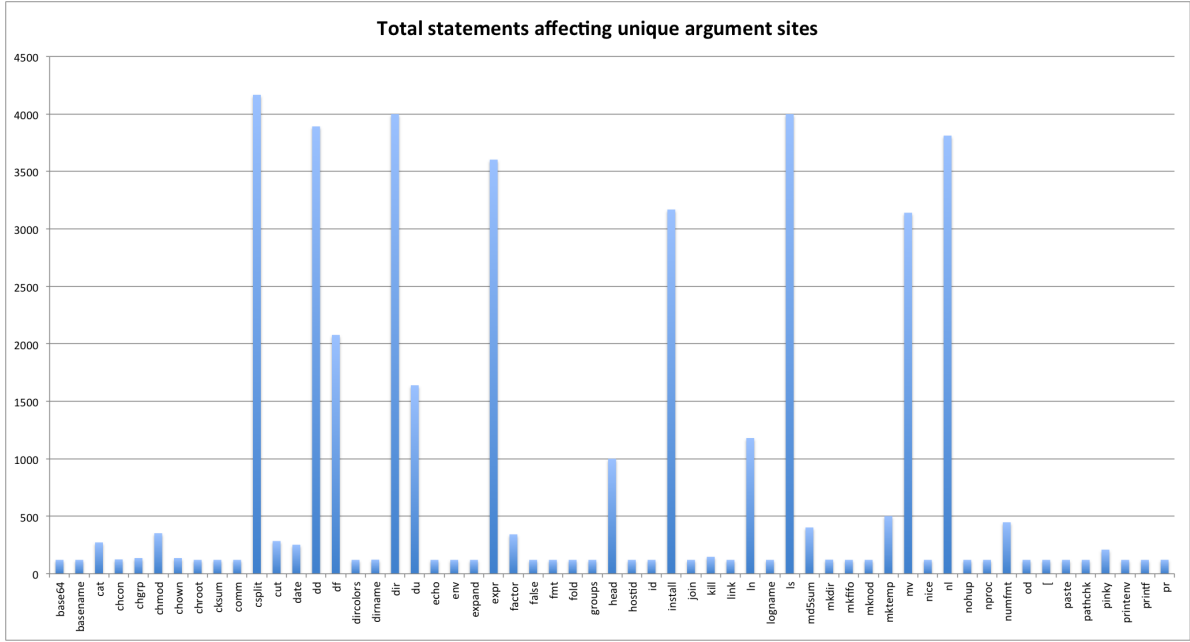


Figure 1: Coreutils statistics generated by plugin



3.3 Heap Check Plugin

For evaluation of the heap check plugin, we executed the plugin on each executable from the **coreutils** suite of system programs. This is composed of 103 binaries, such as **cat**, **wc**, **who**, etc. Additionally, we compiled four separate versions of each plugin with different optimization levels; one at 00, one at 01, one at 02, and one at 03.

4 Experimental Evaluation

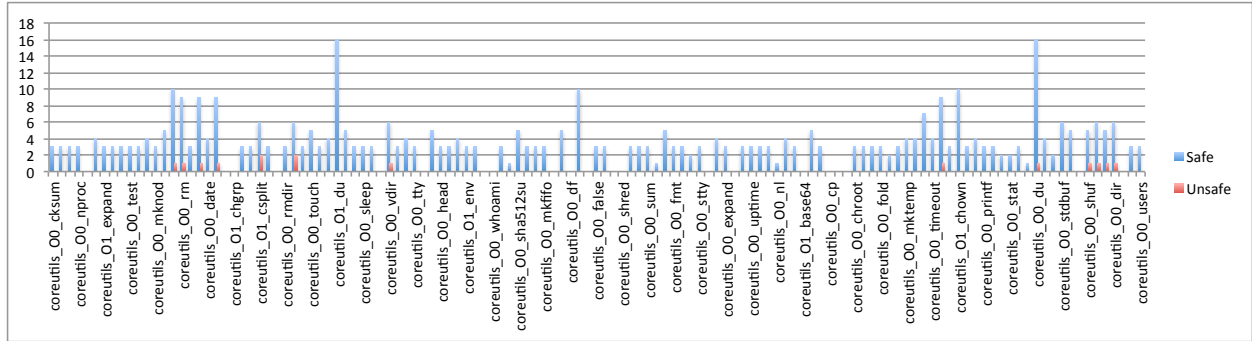
In general, we were pleased that our plugins ran successfully on our own example binaries as well as **Coreutils**. A key aspect of evaluating the success of our project is that we were able to start with a basic API in BAP, and after implementing a non-trivial amount of ‘infrastructure’ code,

arrive at three individual plugins which are able to produce security outcomes.

Our evaluation of these plugins are largely qualitative rather than quantitative at this stage. However, they serve as very useful data points toward developing more sophisticated analyses.

4.1 Malloc Check Plugin

Figure 2: Malloc checking result in coreutils binaries.



So far, we applied our checking on 128 binaries from Coreutils. The result showed that we found 15 places that `malloc` is not checked according to our rules.

Listing 6: Function `re_node_set_alloc`

```
0000f910 <re_node_set_alloc>:
f910: e92d4010 push {r4, lr}
f914: e1a04000 mov r4, r0
f918: e5801000 str r1, [r0]
f91c: e3a03000 mov r3, 0
f920: e5803004 str r3, [r0, 4]
f924: e1a00101 lsl r0, r1, 2
f928: ebfef6f6 bl 9508 <malloc@plt>
f92c: e5840008 str r0, [r4, 8]
f930: e3500000 cmp r0, 0
f934: 03a0000c moveq r0, 12
f938: 13a00000 movne r0, 0
f93c: e8bd8010 pop {r4, pc}
```

For example, we found that although the function `re_node_set_alloc` compares the return value of `malloc`, it does not handle the case where the return value is 0. Instead, the return value will be stored on the stack and overwrite another value.

4.2 Stack Check Plugin

As mentioned, our stack check plugin did not trigger any violations when run over the Coreutils test suite. This result was largely anticipated: the Coreutils library was chosen so that we could verify that our plugins run and to rule out the possibility that binaries in Coreutils exhibited rudimentary flaws.

In critique of this plugin, there are a number of stack-based errors that could occur despite our checks. For example, consider a stack frame containing multiple local buffers at runtime. It is feasible that a buggy `strcpy` call could copy bytes beyond the boundary of a single buffer into an adjacent buffer, while remaining within the stack bounds. Our plugin would not detect this case. Consider a further case where memory accesses to the stack are dependent on general purpose registers—here we cannot conclude whether the access is within range of the stack frame.

A positive side-effect of the plugin is the potential of reusability, and by extension, refinement toward more sophisticated analyses. Recall that this plugin collects and makes use of statements that an argument site depends on. Thus, we have the ability to store the output of our analysis without having to rerun the plugin. For example, we may be able to couple this data with pointer-analysis, and infer stack boundaries.

4.3 Heap Check Plugin

Of this output, our plugin identified a total of 4303 calls to pre-identified memory allocation functions, namely `xmalloc`, `malloc`, `xrealloc`, `realloc`, and `calloc`. Among these, the memory allocation size was identified for 369 of these callsites, whereas 3934 of these callsites had an unknown allocation size. Drilling down further, 804 of these unknown callsites involved left arithmetic shifts (multiplication) on a temporary variable, which our plugin would likely be able to identify given some additional development work. Another 426 of these unknown callsites had an allocation size that was loaded from memory, which would be difficult to resolve without pointer analysis and significant additional development effort. The remaining 2707 of these unknown callsites were due to the allocation size value being passed through more than one register, which our plugin is currently unable to resolve. By making the callsite identification routine recursive, it is likely that we would be able to resolve these unknown callsites further into one of the above subcases. Below is a sample of the program output demonstrating these different results:

```
coreutils_03_groups.out:182:>> 0xAFFC:32: xmalloc (UNKNOWN: R1)
coreutils_03_head.out:17:>> 0x9C8C:32: xrealloc (UNKNOWN: t_26405 << 0x2:32)
coreutils_03_head.out:52:>> 0x9730:32: xmalloc (UNKNOWN: mem[SP + 0x64:32, e1]:u32)
coreutils_03_who.out:335:>> 0xD2D0:32: xmalloc (0x21:32)
```

Of the above callsites with memory allocation sizes that were statically identified, the memory operation offset was successfully determined and identified as safe for five of these, as shown below. None were identified as unsafe, and 301 were unchecked. It is likely that more of these unchecked uses would be resolvable given additional development effort, since the current implementation is only capable of resolving additive (and not negative, multiplicative, etc) offsets to the allocation site. Note that of the five memory operations identified as safe, all were in the 00 version of the respective `coreutils` binary, indicating that higher optimization levels are generating more complex code that currently cannot be resolved.

```
coreutils_00_chmod.out:194:>> 0xAF14:32: R3 + 0x0:32 <- t_67547 (UNCHECKED)
coreutils_00_chmod.out:196:>> 0xAF20:32: R3 + 0x1:32 <- t_67551 (UNCHECKED)
coreutils_00_chmod.out:198:>> 0xAF2C:32: R3 + 0x4:32 <- R2 (UNCHECKED)
coreutils_00_chmod.out:200:>> 0xAF38:32: R3 + 0x8:32 <- R2 (UNCHECKED)
coreutils_00_chmod.out:202:>> 0xAF44:32: R3 + 0xC:32 <- R2 (UNCHECKED)

coreutils_00_chmod.out:204:>> 0xAF54:32: R3 + 0x1:32 <- t_67567 (SAFE: 0x20:32 > 0x10:32)
coreutils_00_install.out:1515:>> 0x179BC:32: R3 + 0x1:32 <- t_186264 (SAFE: 0x20:32 > 0x10:32)
coreutils_00_mkdir.out:176:>> 0xA880:32: R3 + 0x1:32 <- t_36422 (SAFE: 0x20:32 > 0x10:32)
coreutils_00_mkfifo.out:109:>> 0x9B14:32: R3 + 0x1:32 <- t_25151 (SAFE: 0x20:32 > 0x10:32)
coreutils_00_mknod.out:125:>> 0xA2B0:32: R3 + 0x1:32 <- t_31175 (SAFE: 0x20:32 > 0x10:32)
```

5 Surprises and Lessons Learned

There were a number of surprises and lessons learned throughout this project.

5.1 Development Hurdles

One of the common problems that we encountered while developing our analysis plugins was a lack of preexisting compiler analysis in the BAP framework. In particular, since we are performing our analysis at both the assembly and BIL level, common compiler simplifications like Static

Single Assignment (SSA) are not available, requiring manual implementation of def-use and use-def chains using the dataflow framework to resolve. Likewise, BAP does not include any built-in constant propagation or constant folding passes, requiring manual pattern-matching on arithmetic instructions in an attempt to resolve register operations to constant values. Furthermore, BAP does not have any built-in pointer analysis capabilities, and due to time constraints, we did not track values passed in and out of memory for our analysis.

Likewise, due to the rapid development of the BAP framework, we also encountered problems in which certain APIs that our plugin utilizes were renamed or modified in the ‘master’ branch of the BAP repository. This essentially presented a trade-off between spending additional development effort to revise existing code, and updating to newer version of the BAP framework to obtain newer features and fix existing bugs.

5.2 Reasoning about buffer overflows

An initial approach towards ensuring stack buffer overflow detection was to attempt to reason about sizes of buffers which are passed to “Potentially Dangerous Functions” [8] such as `strcpy`. This turned out to be an unfruitful approach for the scope of the project, since one would have to invariably have to reason about memory accesses.

A concrete example that illustrates the difficulty of performing checks on `strcpy` was found when we considered `libxkbfile.so.1.0.2`. Initially we thought that this is a candidate we could perform our check on, due to containing a `strcpy(buf, "none")` [2] call. However, this was found to compile to the `LDMIA.W` instructions mentioned before. This example principally highlights the difficulty in choosing candidates for testing.

One surprising result was the great number of statements (over 200) that some argument sites were found to depend on in `Coreutils` binaries. It was also the case that this result was exhibited inside large functions. When testing the plugin on small examples initially, the number of statements rarely numbered more than 20. As mentioned previously, we speculate that this will affect

5.3 Reasoning about heap memory

As mentioned in the discussion of our results, it became apparent that the number of resolved memory allocations could be significantly improved with moderate additional development effort. Among these would be incorporating a more comprehensive constant propagation analysis for resolving memory allocation sizes, as the current heap check plugin only looks for constant additive offsets to the base allocation site; as mentioned previously it is currently incapable of identifying other common arithmetic operations such as left shifts (multiplication), etc. Likewise, including better tracking of values from one register to another would likely allow for more memory allocation sizes to be resolvable into either a constant or a value produced by a memory operation, which is currently unhandled.

Basic memory tracking would likely also improve our results significantly, at least for the O0 binaries, as we have discovered that the compiler may occasionally produce a back-to-back memory store followed by a memory load from the same address. This is currently considered unresolvable.

5.4 General Things Learned

In general, this project made clear the difficulty of tackling binary problems. Specifically, we cannot advance the problem of analyzing binaries without basic “building blocks” which provide information about the security outcome we wish to address. For each such potential outcome in the future, we will have to consider critically what types of “building blocks” we need, whether pointer analysis, path-sensitivity, context-sensitivity, etc.

We learned that it is more effective in our research to develop our approaches with respect to security outcomes. By doing so, we incrementally identify the requirements for producing desired security outcomes (e.g., reaching definitions, use-def). It also seems to be a pattern that more sophisticated analyses are built on top of simpler analyses (like those produced in this project), rather than sophisticated analysis being stand-alone. This follows because we require more fundamental information before reasoning about further complexities.

6 Conclusions and Future Work

We will focus specifically on refining the sophistication of our analyses to handle broader cases as outlined in our discussions. A major benefit of identifying the limitations in our approach and evaluation is that it immediately highlights areas of refinement. The additional goals beyond 100% in our original proposal are all candidates for formulating future analyses. In summary, these are:

- Implement intraprocedural detection of null pointer dereferences
- Implement detection of dynamic memory errors e.g. dangling pointers, double frees, and invalid frees
- Implement intraprocedural detection of variables with uninitialized variables e.g. usage of variables with unassigned values
- Evaluate soundness, completeness, and performance of our tool against similar bug checking tools, e.g. Address Sanitizer, Valgrind MemCheck, Clang Static Analyzer, Coverity, CodeSonar, etc.

From a more general perspective, the scope of our analyses could be improved by implementing basic support for pointer analysis, interprocedural analysis, and field-sensitive analysis. For example, a large number of the heap allocations that are currently resolvable to be a fixed-sized constant are likely being produced by dynamic memory allocations of custom-defined structs. For these data structures, better granularity would be obtained by performing memory operation safety analysis not only for the entire allocation, but also for individual fields within the allocation. This would likely require pointer analysis plus additional infrastructure to keep track of offsets within the struct that are commonly accessed.

It has been a promising exercise to prototype and test our analyses within the context of this project. We consider the experience and insights gained throughout to be particularly valuable for performing continued research in our group.

7 Distribution of Total Credit

Even three-way split.

Breakdown:

1. Dominic: Implementation of dataflow framework and heap check plugin.
2. Rijnard: Implementation of data dependencies and stack check plugin.
3. Tiffany: Implementation of `malloc` return value check plugin.

A Appendix

A.1 Technical Description of the BAP Dataflow framework

Due to the preliminary status of the current BAP framework, a number of common compiler analyses have not yet been implemented, including a basic dataflow framework. In particular, BAP currently only includes a disassembly engine using the LLVM framework, a lifter from ARM/x86/x86_64 to an intermediate language known as BIL (BAP Intermediate Language), and a basic semantic analysis for identifying basic blocks and performing a graph-based traversal through predecessors and successors.

As a result, we spent the first portion of our project implementing a basic dataflow analysis framework capable of performing both forwards and backwards dataflow analysis. This was accomplished by first implementing a sparse Bitvector module capable of representing both the infimum and supremum lattice elements (e.g. the empty and universal sets). Existing Bitvector representations in the standard library and Jane Streets Core library are not capable of this, because they utilize a fixed-size bit representation for the Bitvector. As a result, this would require a preliminary pass through each basic block and each instruction to identify the number of lattice elements in the Bitvector, reducing performance and flexibility of analysis.

In particular, our custom implementation defines a Bitvector record (datatype) composed of three subvalues: (1) **infinite**: a boolean value that determines whether the bitvector is of infinite size, (2) **value**: a boolean value that determines whether the bits of the bitvector are 0 or 1, and (3) **indexes**: a set of integers that identifies indexes of the bitvector that are set to value. As a result, this implementation allows for the empty and universal sets to be respectively identified by the following simple Bitvector values: `{infinite: true, value: false (0), indexes: {}}` and `{infinite: true, value: true (1), indexes: {}}`. Standard Bitvector operations, such as union, intersection, and difference, are defined using these primitives. As an example, consider an arbitrary Bitvector `a`, and the following operations: `empty - a = empty`, `a - empty = a`, `universal - a = not a`, `a - universal = empty`. These operations are straightforward, even for the relative complement of the universal set with the arbitrary Bitvector; this can be represented by simply toggling the value attribute from true to false or vice-versa.

Specifically, this highlights the idea that each finite Bitvector has two distinct representations: one with value set to true and indexes containing a set of bit indexes that are set, and another with value set to false and indexes containing a set of bit indexes that are unset. Although this does increase the logical complexity of the implementation, it allows for greater lattice representation flexibility with decreased memory consumption.

Otherwise, the dataflow framework implementation is relatively standardized, and is built on top of this lattice representation. A pair of maps are defined for translating unique instruction addresses of BIL or assembly instructions to lattice values, and vice-versa. This is achieved through the use of a mutable counter that identifies the unique Bitvector index associated with each instruction. Then, analysis results from each sequence of BIL instructions are propagated to each assembly instruction, and subsequently to each basic block, allowing for analysis granularity at all levels. Users of the framework specify initial values for each interior and boundary point, the entry block of analysis, and the direction of the dataflow analysis. Since the BAP framework is written in a functional language, the user can also pass a user-defined meet function and transfer function

for performing the body of analysis. An internal worklist is used to keep track of basic blocks that needs to be scheduled for reanalysis; this is achieved by making the main dataflow analysis function recursive, and iterating through every basic block on the worklist before constructing a new worklist from those basic blocks with modified dataflow lattice values.

B Appendix

BIL Dissassembly of Listing 6

```

SP := SP - 0x8:32
mem := mem          with [base_436 + 0xFFFFFFFF8:32, e1]:u32 <- R11
mem := mem          with [base_436 + 0xFFFFFFFFC:32, e1]:u32 <- LR
base_436 := SP
R11 := SP + 0x4:32
t_439 := 0x4:32
s_438 := SP
SP := SP - 0x18:32
t_442 := 0x18:32
s_441 := SP
mem := mem          with [R11 + 0xFFFFFFE8:32, e1]:u32 <- R0
mem := mem          with [R11 + 0xFFFFFE4:32, e1]:u32 <- R1
R3 := R11 - 0x10:32
t_447 := 0x10:32
s_446 := R11g
R2 := 0x0:32
mem := mem          with [R3 + 0x0:32, e1]:u32 <- R2
R3 := R3 + 0x4:32
t_452 := 0x4:32
s_451 := R3
R2 := 0x0:32
mem := mem          with [R3 + 0x0:32, e1]:u32 <- R2
R3 := R3 + 0x4:32
t_457 := 0x4:32
s_456 := R3
R2 := 0x0:32
mem := mem          with [R3 + 0x0:32, e1]:u16 <- t_460
t_460 := low:16[R2]
R3 := R3 + 0x2:32
t_463 := 0x2:32
s_462 := R3
R3 := mem[R11 + 0xFFFFFE4:32, e1]:u32
R3 := R3 + 0x4:32
t_467 := 0x4:32
s_466 := R3
R3 := mem[R3 + 0x0:32, e1]:u32
R2 := R11 - 0x10:32
t_471 := 0x10:32
s_470 := R11

```



```

R0 := R2
R1 := R3
jmp 0x82E0:32
LR := 0x849C:32

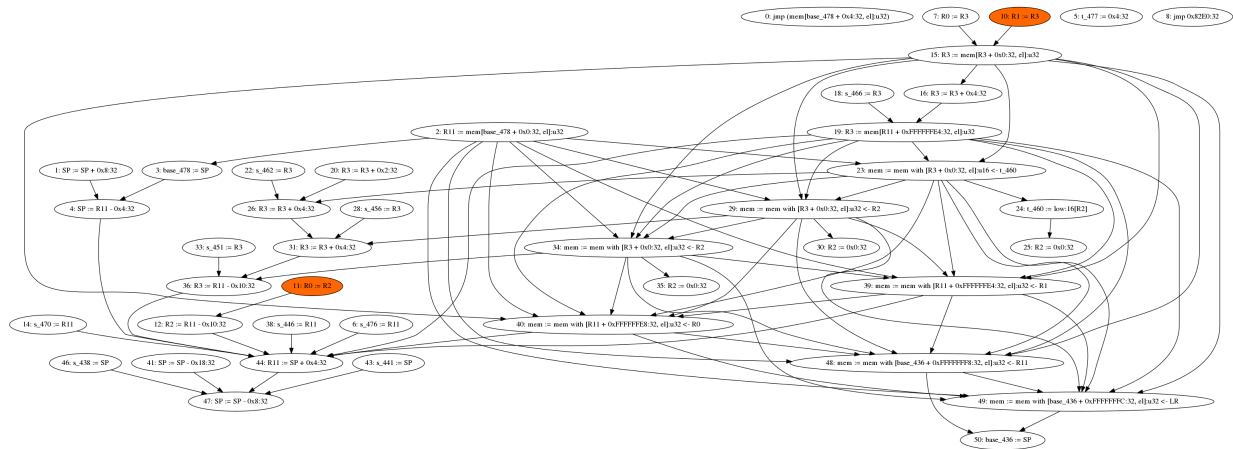
```

BIL data dependency instructions for argv[1]

```

<(0x8444:32, 0)> base_436 := SP
<(0x8444:32, 1)> mem := mem          with [base_436 + 0xFFFFFFFFC:32, e1]:u32 <- LR
<(0x8444:32, 2)> mem := mem          with [base_436 + 0xFFFFFFFF8:32, e1]:u32 <- R11
<(0x8444:32, 3)> SP := SP - 0x8:32
<(0x8448:32, 2)> R11 := SP + 0x4:32
<(0x8450:32, 0)> mem := mem          with [R11 + 0xFFFFFFE8:32, e1]:u32 <- R0
<(0x8454:32, 0)> mem := mem          with [R11 + 0xFFFFFE4:32, e1]:u32 <- R1
<(0x8458:32, 2)> R3 := R11 - 0x10:32
<(0x845C:32, 0)> R2 := 0x0:32
<(0x8460:32, 0)> mem := mem          with [R3 + 0x0:32, e1]:u32 <- R2
<(0x8464:32, 2)> R3 := R3 + 0x4:32
<(0x8468:32, 0)> R2 := 0x0:32
<(0x846C:32, 0)> mem := mem          with [R3 + 0x0:32, e1]:u32 <- R2
<(0x8470:32, 2)> R3 := R3 + 0x4:32
<(0x8474:32, 0)> R2 := 0x0:32
<(0x8478:32, 0)> t_460 := low:16[R2]
<(0x8478:32, 1)> mem := mem          with [R3 + 0x0:32, e1]:u16 <- t_460
<(0x8480:32, 0)> R3 := mem[R11 + 0xFFFFFE4:32, e1]:u32
<(0x8484:32, 2)> R3 := R3 + 0x4:32
<(0x8488:32, 0)> R3 := mem[R3 + 0x0:32, e1]:u32

```



Graphical output of BIL data dependencies, with highlighted arguments

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