

# Bringing the Power of eBPF to Open vSwitch

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## Abstract

eBPF is an emerging technology in Linux kernel with the goal of making Linux kernel extensible by providing an eBPF virtual machine with safety guarantee. Open vSwitch, OVS, is a software switch running majorly in Linux operating systems, its fast path packet process is implemented in Linux kernel module, `openvswitch.ko`. To provide greater flexibility and extensibility to OVS datapath, in this work, we present our design on making use of eBPF technology in OVS datapath development with two projects: the OVS-eBPF project and the OVS-AFXDP project. The goal of OVS-eBPF project is to re-write existing flow processing features in `openvswitch` kernel datapath into eBPF program, and attaching it to Linux TC. On the other hand, the OVS-AFXDP project aims to by-passing the kernel using `AF_XDP` socket and moves most of the flow processing features into userspace. We demonstrate the feasibility of implementing OVS datapath with the aforementioned technologies and present the performance number in this paper.

## 1. Introduction

eBPF, extended Berkeley Packet Filter, enables userspace applications to customize and extend the Linux kernel's functionality. It provides flexible platform abstractions for network functions, and is being ported to a variety of platforms. In Linux kernel, users can attach eBPF programs to TC and XDP hook point as shown in Fig 1. Based on this design, we explore the possibilities of utilizing eBPF to implement OVS datapath in threefold: 1) in-kernel flow processing by attaching eBPF programs to TC, 2) offloading a subset of flow processing to XDP (eXpress Data Path), and 3) moving the flow processing to userspace by using `AF_XDP`.

Firstly, in OVS-eBPF project, we attach flow processing eBPF programs to TC. We start with the most aggressive goal that we plan to re-implement the entire features of OVS kernel datapath under `net/openvswitch/*` into eBPF code. We work around a couple of eBPF limitations, for example, the lack of TLV (Type-Length-Value) support leads us to redefine a binary kernel-user API using a fixed-length array; without a dedicated way to execute a packet, we create a dedicated device that attached a eBPF program to handle

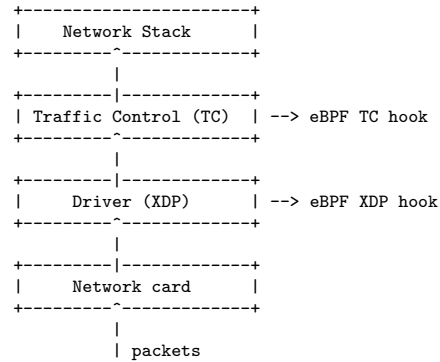


Figure 1: eBPF program hook points in the Linux kernel.

packet execute logic for userspace to kernel packet transmission. Currently, OVS-eBPF can satisfy most of the basic feature for flow processing and tunneling protocol support, and we are investigating more complicated features such as connection tracking, NAT, (de)fragmentation, and ALG.

We can attach eBPF programs one layer below TC to XDP (eXpress Data Path). It is a much faster layer for packet processing, but there is almost no extra packet metadata available, and XDP only provides limited kernel helpers. Depending on the type of flows, OVS can offload a subset of its flow processing to XDP. However, the fact that XDP has fewer helper function support implies that either 1) only very limited number of flows are eligible for offload, or 2) more flow processing logic needed to be implemented in native eBPF code. For example, it is more difficult for OVS datapath to provide tunnel support in XDP, since lightweight tunnel kernel helpers is not available.

XDP provides another way for interacting with userspace programs, called `AF_XDP`. `AF_XDP` is a socket interface for control plane and a shared memory API for accessing packets from userspace application. With `AF_XDP`, OVS-AFXDP project redirect packets to userspace, and processes the packets by OVS's full-fledged userspace datapath implementation, `dpif-netdev`. In this approach, OVS-AFXDP project treats the `AF_XDP` as a fast packet-I/O channel, and move most of the flow processing into the userspace OVS.

This paper focuses on the OVS-eBPF and OVS-AFXDP projects. A rough comparison of the two project is shown in

Projects	OVS-eBPF	OVS-AFXDP
Packet Rate	Low	High
Driver Support	No	Yes
Minimal Kernel Req.	4.18	Unknown
BPF Code Size	Large	Minimal
Extensibility	Good	Great

Table 1: Comparison of the OVS-eBPF project and OVS-AFXDP project.

Table 1. The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: In Section 2, we first provide some background information on eBPF, XDP, and AF\_XDP. We then present the design, implementation, and evaluation of the OVS-eBPF and OVS-AFXDP projects in Section 3 and Section 4 respectively. Finally, Section 5 concludes the paper and discusses the future work.

## 2. Background

### 2.1 OVS Forwarding Model

OVS is widely used in virtualized data center environments as a software switching layer inside various operating systems, including FreeBSD, Windows Hyper-V, Solaris and Linux. As shown in Figure 2, the architecture of OVS consists of two major components: a slow path and a fast path. OVS begins processing packets in its datapath, the fast path, shortly after the packet is received by the NIC in the host OS. The OVS datapath first performs packet parsing to extract relevant protocol headers from the packet and store it locally in a manner that is efficient for performing lookups (flow key), then it uses this information to look into the match/action cache (flow table) and determines what needs to be done for this packet. If there is no match in the flow table, the datapath passes the packet from the kernel up to the slow path, `ovs-vswitchd`, which maintains the full determination of what needs to be executed to modify and forward the packet correctly. This process is called packet *upcall* and usually happens at the first packet of a flow seen by the OVS datapath. If the packet matches in this flow table, then the OVS datapath executes its corresponding actions from the flow table lookup result and updates its flow statistics.

In this model, the `ovs-vswitchd` determines how the packet should be handled, and passes the information to the datapath inside the kernel using a Linux generic netlink interface. Over the years the OVS datapath features evolved. The initial OVS datapath used a microflow cache for its flow table, essentially caching exact-match entries for each transport layer connection’s forwarding decision. And in later versions, two layers of caching were used: a microflow cache and a megafLOW cache, which caches forwarding decisions for traffic aggregates beyond individual connections. In recent versions of OVS, datapath implementations include features such as connection tracking, stateful network address translation, and support for layer 3 tunneling protocols.

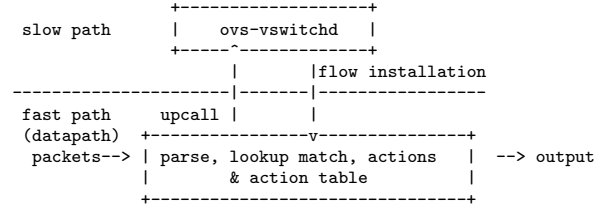


Figure 2: The forwarding plane of OVS consists of two components; `ovs-vswitchd` handles the complexity of the OpenFlow protocol, and the datapath acts as a caching layer to optimize the performance. A flow missed by the match/action table in the datapath triggers an *upcall*, which forwards the information to `ovs-vswitchd`. `ovs-vswitchd` installs an appropriate flow entry into the datapath’s match/action table.

### 2.2 eBPF Basics

Berkeley Packet Filter, BPF, is an instruction set architecture proposed by Steven McCanne and Van Jacobson in 1993 [14]. BPF was designed as a generic packet filtering solution and is widely used by every network operator today, through the well-known `tcpdump`/`wireshark` applications. A BPF interpreter is attached early in the packet receive call chain, and it executes a BPF program as a list of instructions. A BPF program typically parses a packet and decides whether to pass the packet to a userspace socket. With its simple architecture and early filtering decision logic, it can execute this logic efficiently.

For the past few years, the Linux kernel community has improved the traditional BPF (now renamed to classic BPF, cBPF) interpreter inside the kernel with additional instructions, known as extended BPF (eBPF). eBPF was introduced with the purpose of broadening the programmability of the Linux kernel. Within the kernel, eBPF instructions run in a virtual machine environment. The virtual machine provides a few registers, stack space, program counter, and a way to interact with the rest of the kernel through a mechanism called helper functions. Similar to cBPF, eBPF operates in an event-driven model on a particular hook point; each hook point has its own execution *context* and execution at the hook point only starts when a particular type of event fires. A BPF program is written against a specific context. For example, a BPF program attached to a raw socket interface has a context which includes the packet, and the program is only triggered to run when there is an incoming packet to the raw socket.

The eBPF virtual machine provides a completely isolated environment for its bytecode running inside; in other words, it cannot arbitrarily call other kernel functions or access into memory outside its own environment. To interact with the outside world, the eBPF architecture white-lists a set of helper functions that a BPF program can call, depending on the *context* of the BPF program. For example, a BPF program attached to raw socket in a packet context could invoke VLAN push or pop related helper functions, while a BPF program with a kernel tracing context could not.

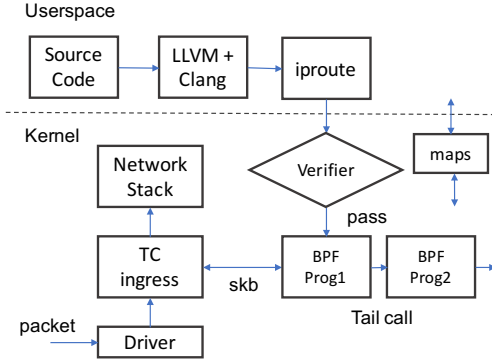


Figure 3: The workflow of TC and XDP eBPF development process and its packet flow. The eBPF program compiled by LLVM+clang is loaded into the kernel using iproute. The kernel runs the program through a verification stage, and subsequently attaches the program to the TC/XDP ingress hook point. Once successfully loaded, an incoming packet received by XDP/TC ingress will execute the eBPF program.

To store and share state, eBPF provides a mechanism to interact with a variety of key/value stores, called *maps*. eBPF maps reside in the kernel, and can be shared and accessed from eBPF programs and userspace applications. eBPF programs can access maps through helper functions, while userspace applications can access maps through BPF system calls. There are a variety of map types for different use cases, such as hash tables or arrays. These are created by a userspace program and may be shared between multiple eBPF programs running in any hook point.

Finally, eBPF tail call [18] is a mechanism allowing one eBPF program to trigger execution of another eBPF program, providing users the flexibility of composing a chain of eBPF programs with each one focusing on particular features. Unlike a traditional function call, this tail call mechanism calls another program without returning back to the caller’s program. The tail call reuses the caller’s stack frame, which allows the eBPF implementation to minimize call overhead and simplifies verification of eBPF programs.

### 2.3 XDP: eXpress Data Path

There are several hook points where eBPF programs can be attached in recent Linux kernels. XDP [1, 7] is another eBPF program hook point where its attachment point is at the lowest level of the network stack. XDP demonstrates high performance that closed to the line rate of the device, since the eBPF programs attached to XDP hook point are triggered immediately in the network device driver’s packet receiving code path. For the same reason, eBPF program in XDP can only access the packet data and a few metadata. XDP supports accessing to eBPF maps and tail calls, but much less number of helper functions is available compared to the TC hook point.

Figure 3 shows the typical workflow for installing an eBPF program to the TC/XDP hook point, and how pack-

ets trigger eBPF execution. Clang and LLVM takes a program written in C and compiles it down to the eBPF instruction set, then emits an ELF file that contains eBPF instructions. An eBPF loader, such as iproute, takes the ELF file, parses the programs and maps information from it and issues BPF syscalls to load the program. If the program passes the BPF verifier, then it is attached to the hook point (in this case, TC/XDP), and subsequent packets through the TC/XDP ingress hook will trigger execution of the eBPF programs.

### 2.4 AF\_XDP Socket

AF\_XDP is a new Linux address family that aims for high packet I/O performance. It enables another way for a userspace program to receive packets from kernel through the socket API. For example, currently, creating a socket with address family AF\_PACKET, userspace programs can receive/send the raw packets at the device driver layer. Although the AF\_PACKET family has been using in many places such as tcpdump, its performance does not catch up with the recent high speed network devices, such as 40G/100G NICs. Performance evaluation [13, 17] of AF\_PACKET shows less than 2 million packets per second using single core.

AF\_XDP was proposed and upstreamed to Linux kernel since 4.18 [8]. The core idea behind the AF\_XDP is to leverage the XDP eBPF program’s early access to the raw packet, and provide a high speed channel from the XDP directly to a userspace socket interface. In other word, AF\_XDP socket family connects the XDP packet receiving/sending path to the userspace, by-passing the rest of the Linux networking stacks. An AF\_XDP socket, called XSK, is created by using the normal socket() system call. Unlike AF\_PACKET which uses the send() and receive() syscalls with packet buffer as parameter, XSK introduces two rings in userspace: the Rx ring and the Tx ring. These two rings are per-XSK data structure that the userspace program needs to properly configure and maintain in order to receive and send packets. Moreover, to provide zerocopy support for AF\_XDP, all the packet data buffers used in Tx/Rx rings are allocated from a specific memory region called *umem* which consists of a number of fixed size memory chunks. Two rings, the Fill ring and the Completion ring, are associated with a umem, and a umem can be shared between multiple XSKs. Each element in the Rx/Tx ring or in Fill/Completion ring is a descriptor that contains an address that points to a chunk in umem. The address is not system’s virtual or physical address but simply an offset within the entire umem memory region.

For example, to receive packets from XSK, firstly, a set of descriptors pointing to empty packet buffer need to be pushed into the Fill ring. When a packet arrives, kernel pops descriptors from the Fill ring, fills in the data into the memory chunks pointed by the descriptors, and pushes the descriptors back to the Rx ring. The userspace program then checks the Rx ring, fetches the packet data from the

descriptors, and refills the empty buffer back to the Fill ring structure, so that kernel can fill in new incoming packets later on. For sending packets, the userspace program pushes a set of descriptors that point to the packet buffers to the Tx ring, then issues `sendmsg()` system call. Kernel consumes the Tx ring, and pushes transmitted descriptors to the Tx ring. The userspace program then checks the Completion ring to determine whether the packets have been sent. In summary, XSK users need to properly program following four rings:

- Fill ring: for users to fill umem addresses to kernel for receiving packets.
- Rx ring: for users to access received packets.
- Tx ring: for users to place packets needed to be sent.
- Completion ring: for users to check if packets are sent.

Unlike `AF_PACKET` which is bound to entire `netdev`, the binding of XSK is more fine-grained. XSK is bound to a specific queue on a device, so only the traffic/flow sent to the queue shows up in the XSK.

### 3. OVS eBPF Datapath

#### 3.1 eBPF Configuration and Maps

The OVS eBPF datapath consists of one ELF-formatted object file which provides the full functionality of an OVS datapath. This object defines a set of maps and a set of eBPF programs which implement a subset of the datapath functionality. To bootstrap, we load the eBPF program into the kernel using `iproute`. One of the programs is marked within the ELF file to indicate that it should be attached to the hook point; the other programs are only executed via tail calls rooted in the eBPF hook point. The ELF file also defines multiple persistent eBPF maps, which are pinned to the BPF filesystem [2] for sharing between different eBPF programs and `ovs-vswitchd`. The OVS datapath requires the following eBPF maps:

- Flow key. This is the internal representation of the protocol headers and metadata for the current packet being processed, defined in the P4 [6] language.
- Flow Table. This is a hash table whose key is the 32-bit hash value of the flow key, from both packet and its metadata, and value equals an array of actions to execute upon the flow.
- Stats Table. This is similar to the flow table, but rather than holding an array of actions to execute for the packet, it contains packet and byte statistics for the flow.
- Perf Ring Buffer [3, 5]. The perf event map allows an eBPF program to put user-defined data into a ring buffer which may be read from a userspace program. `ovs-vswitchd` memory maps this ring buffer to read packets and metadata from the eBPF program for flow miss upcall processing.

- Program Array. This map allows eBPF programs to tail call other eBPF programs. When the BPF loader inserts eBPF programs into the kernel, it assigns unique indexes for each program and stores these into the map. At run time, an eBPF program will tail call another program by referring to an index within this map.

The OVS eBPF program is triggered by the TC ingress hook associated with a particular network device. Multiple instances of the same eBPF program may be triggered simultaneously on different cores which are receiving traffic from different network devices. The eBPF maps, unless specified, have a single instance across all cores. Access to map entries are protected by the kernel RCU [15] mechanism which makes it safe to read concurrently. However, there are no built-in mechanisms to protect writers to the maps. For the flow table map, OVS avoids the race by ensuring that only `ovs-vswitchd` inserts or removes elements from the map from a single thread. For flow statistics, atomic operations are used to avoid race conditions. Other maps such as the flow key perf ring buffer maps use per-cpu instances to manage synchronization.

#### 3.2 Header Parsing and Lookup

When a packet arrives on the TC ingress hook, the OVS eBPF datapath begins executing a series of programs, beginning with the parser/lookup program as shown in Figure 4. The eBPF parser program consists of two components; standard protocol parsing and Linux-specific metadata parsing. The protocol parsing is executed directly on the packet bytes based on standardized protocols, while the platform-specific metadata parsing must occur on the context provided by the eBPF environment.

The resulting code will assemble the protocol headers and metadata, collectively known as the flow key. This flow key is then used to look for an entry in the flow table map, to get an array of actions to execute. If there is no entry in the flow table map, then the packet and the flow key will be written to the perf event map for further processing by `ovs-vswitchd`.

#### 3.3 Action Execution

When a lookup is successful the eBPF gets a list of actions to be executed, such as outputting the packet to a certain port, or pushing a VLAN tag. The list of actions is configured in `ovs-vswitchd` and may be a variable length depending on the desired network processing behaviour. For example, an L2 switch doing unknown broadcast sends packet to all its current ports. The OVS datapath's actions is derived from the OpenFlow action specification and the OVSDB schema for `ovs-vswitchd`.

One might expect to intuitively write an eBPF program to iterate across the list of actions to execute, with each iteration of the loop dealing with a particular action in the list. Unfortunately, this type of iteration implies dynamic loops,

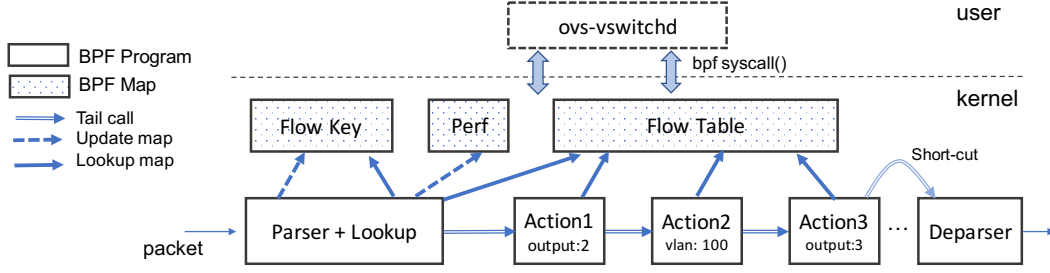


Figure 4: The overall architecture of OVS eBPF datapath consists of multiple eBPF programs which are tail-called dynamically, maps which are shared between eBPF programs and userspace applications, and ovs-vswitchd as the management plane for all components.

which are restricted within the eBPF forwarding model. Moreover, the variable number of actions also implies that there is no way to guarantee the bounded program size, which is limited to 4,096 eBPF bytecode instructions.

To solve these challenges, we first break each type of action logic into an independent eBPF program and tail call from one eBPF action program to another, as shown in Figure 4. This alleviates the problem from having 4k instructions for the entire action list to 4k instructions per action. Our proof-of-concept implementation shows that this limitation is sufficient for all existing actions. Additionally, the design allows each action to be implemented and verified independently. Second, to solve the dynamic looping problem, we convert the variable length list of actions into a fixed length 32-element array. As a result, flow table lookup always returns an array of 32 actions to be executed, and the LLVM compiler unrolls the loop to pass the BPF verifier. If a matching flow has less than 32 actions to execute, the rest of the actions is no-op, and we short-cut the action execution to the deparser. If a matching flow has more than 32 actions, then the eBPF datapath delegates the execution to userspace datapath, i.e., the slow path. For many use cases, this is sufficient; there is room to further optimize this path in the future if common cases require more than 32 actions.

Each action also requires certain action-specific metadata to execute. For example, an output action would require an ifindex to indicate the output interface, while a push\_vlan action needs the VLAN ID to be inserted into the VLAN tag. To accommodate this, the array element not only contains the action to execute, but also the metadata required by the particular action. The size of each element must be big enough to hold the metadata for any action, as it is a fixed sized array. Future work may relax this requirement.

Each eBPF program executes in an isolated environment. As a consequence of breaking the action list into individual eBPF action programs, some state needs to be transferred between the current eBPF program and the next. The state to transfer from one eBPF action program to another includes (1) The flow key, so that the currently executing eBPF action program can lookup the flow table, and (2) The action index in the actions list, so that the eBPF action program knows it is executing the Nth element in the list, and at the end of its

processing, to tail-call the  $n+1$ th action program. Currently eBPF could use either per-CPU maps as scratch buffers or the context’s packet control block (cb) to pass data between programs. In our design, we use one 32-bit value in the cb to keep the action index, and per-cpu maps to save the flow key.

Figure 4 also demonstrates an example eBPF execution of a packet forwarded to port 2 as well as port mirroring to a VLAN port with VLAN ID 100 at port 3. Once the packet is parsed, the flow table lookup returns an action list of output:2, push\_vlan:100, output:3. At the end of the parser+lookup program, it tail calls the eBPF output program as the first step to kick start action execution. The execution of this output program overwrites the caller’s stack, so it has to look up the flow table map to retrieve the flow key, and execute the output action. Once done, the output action increments the action index from 0 to 1, saves it in cb, and tail-calls the next action program, which is push\_vlan. The push\_vlan eBPF program again looks up the flow table, and fetches the action metadata at index 1 and executes the push VLAN action using a BPF helper function. The third output action follows the same procedure and finally sends the packet out to port 3.

### 3.4 Flow Miss Upcall and Installation

One of the important tasks of the OVS datapath is to pass any packet that misses its flow table to the slow path to get instructions for further processing. In the existing OVS kernel datapath implementation, the missed packet is sent to ovs-vswitchd, which processes the packet, inserts a flow into the flow table, and re-injects the packet into the kernel datapath using the Linux generic netlink interface. For the eBPF datapath, this design implies two requirements: (1) a way for the eBPF program to communicate with userspace, and (2) a mechanism for the userspace to re-insert packet into the eBPF program.

To address the first requirement, we use the support for Linux perf ring buffers and the skb\_event\_output() eBPF helper function [5] which allows the eBPF program to pass data to the userspace through the Linux perf ring buffer [5]. During miss upcall processing, the eBPF program will insert the full packet and the current flow key

Linux Bridge	OVS Kernel	Linux TC	OVS eBPF
1.6 Mpps	1.4 Mpps	1.9 Mpps	1.12 Mpps

Table 2: Baseline port-to-port forwarding rate using existing Linux subsystems and OVS kernel and eBPF.

into the `perf` ring buffer. To receive the data from userspace, `ovs-vswitchd` runs a thread which maps the ring buffer to its virtual memory using `mmap` system call, and polls the buffer using the `poll` system call. If there is incoming data from the ring buffer, the thread is woken up, it reads from the buffer and processes the packet and metadata. The result of this processing will be inserted into the flow table map. To address the second requirement, we construct a dedicated Linux TAP device which also has the OVS eBPF datapath program attached to it. `ovs-vswitchd` sends the missed packet using an `AF_PACKET` socket, triggering the underlying eBPF program for further processing. This program is very similar to the previously-used parser+lookup program, with minor changes. Specifically, this packet was originally received on one device, however when `ovs-vswitchd` sends the packet on the TAP device, the eBPF program is triggered for the TAP device instead. So, the platform metadata for incoming port misidentifies the source as the TAP device. To ensure that the packet lookup occurs correctly, `ovs-vswitchd` prepends the port number to the beginning of the packet data, then when the eBPF program for the dedicated TAP device processes the packet, it will read this port number into the metadata, then strip this port from the packet. The resulting packet is identical to the originally-received packet, and now the metadata will match the metadata originally generated by the parser+lookup the first time the packet was received. The rest of the lookup, actions execution, and deparser is then executed as per the description in the previous sections.

### 3.5 Evaluation

To quantify the performance of the OVS eBPF datapath, we measure the packet forwarding rate in millions of packets per second (Mpps), using 64-byte packets under different forwarding scenarios. The hardware testbed consists of two Intel Xeon E5 2650 servers, each with an Intel 10GbE X540-AT2 dual port NIC, with the two ports of the Intel NIC on one server connected to the two ports on the identical NIC on the other server. The OVS eBPF datapath is installed on one server, acting as a bridge to forward packets from one port on the NIC to the other, and vice-versa. The other server acts as packet generating host, which runs DPDK packetgen sending at the maximum packet rate of 14.88Mpps. This server sends to one port to the target server, and receives the forwarded packets on the other port. All experiments use only one CPU core running Linux kernel 4.9-rc6.

**Baseline Forwarding Performance.** We start by conducting a simple port-to-port packet forwarding experiment, i.e., receiving packets from one port and outputting to the other,

using the Linux native bridge, Linux TC, and OVS kernel datapath, as shown in Table 2. The native Linux bridge is a simple L2 mac-learning switch with no programmability, showing the forwarding rate of 1.6 Mpps. The OVS kernel module, which does additional flow key extraction, shows a slower forwarding rate of 1.4 Mpps. For forwarding packets using TC, we have an eBPF program loaded into TC, with the program only having one BPF helper function call, the `bpf_skb_redirect`, that redirects the incoming packet from one interface to another. Since TC accesses the incoming packets closest to the driver layer, it shows the highest performance of 1.9 Mpps. Finally, we measure our proposed OVS eBPF forwarding speed, with incoming packets traversing through an eBPF parser+lookup program, an output action program, and the deparser program. Since the OVS eBPF is implemented based on tail calling these additional eBPF programs at TC, we observe the overhead of 0.78 Mpps, a reduction from 1.9 Mpps to 1.12 Mpps.

**Forwarding with action execution.** To further investigate the overhead, we program one additional action executed before the packet is forwarded to the other port. Since the Linux bridge has no programmability, we only compare the OVS kernel datapath with the OVS eBPF datapath. Table 3 shows forwarding packets while executing the additional action type: hash, push\_vlan, set\_dst\_mac, and set\_gre\_tunnel, with the OVS kernel and eBPF datapaths. The forwarding performance of these results is bounded by the CPU cost. In the case of the hash and vlan actions, the NIC allows the processing to be offloaded from the CPU, resulting in minimal performance overhead for executing these actions. As a result, the forwarding rate exhibits little to no overhead above the baseline. Moreover, for the hash and push\_vlan actions, due to the NIC offloading of actions processing, the datapath does not need to execute any modification to the packet contents, so the deparser program execution may be optimized out.

To ensure invoking the deparser, the third experiment, `set_dst_mac`, involves altering packet data, specifically to modify the destination MAC address. In this case, the deparser writes stored metadata from actions processing back to the packet. The performance in this experiment drops to 0.84 Mpps. The drop of 0.28 Mpps from baseline is the result of the deparser writing all known packet header metadata back to the packet, and due to extraneous memory copies introduced by the P4-to-eBPF compiler. With a more intelligent deparser implementation, and by using recent improvements to the eBPF API [4, 19], the performance gap compared with the native kernel implementation is expected to shrink.

Finally, the `set_get_tunnel` action experiment yielded 0.48 Mpps, which represents the additional cost of tunnelling traffic; such traffic must traverse the Linux network stack twice, once for overlay traffic and once for underlay traffic. The eBPF result is also more expensive than the existing



Action	eBPF DP	Kernel DP	Overhead
hash	1.12	1.34	16%
push_vlan	1.11	1.32	15%
set_dst_mac	0.84	1.28	34%
set_gre_tunnel	0.48	0.57	8%

Table 3: Comparison of single core forwarding rate in Mpps with eBPF and Kernel Datapath, with the additional action executed before forwarding the packet to another port.

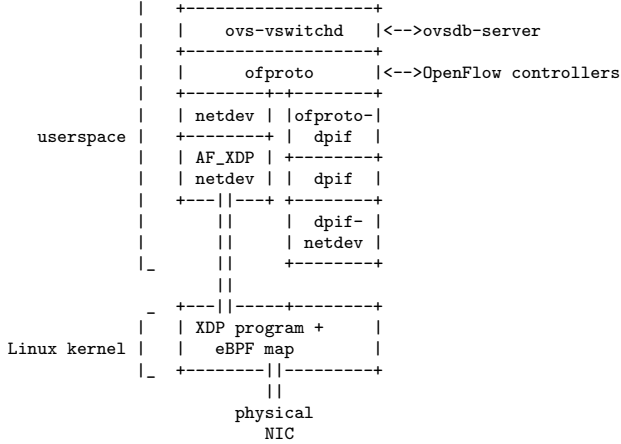


Figure 5: OVS Architecture AF\_XDP

Linux implementation, but with a narrower performance gap than the earlier experiments. The majority of processing in this case occurs outside of OVS, so the overhead of the eBPF datapath has less effect.

## 4. Userspace OVS with AF\_XDP

### 4.1 Datapath and Netdev Interface

OVS includes a userspace datapath interface (dpif) implementation, called *dpif-netdev*. Unlike the *dpif-netlink* which talks to the Linux Open vSwitch kernel module through *netlink* API, the *dpif-netdev* works completely in userspace. As a result, *dpif-netdev* expects to receive and send packets from its userspace interface. One major use case of *dpif-netdev* is OVS-DPDK [?], where the packet reception and transmission are all done in DPDK’s userspace library. The *dpif-netdev* is designed to be agnostic to how the network device accessing the packets, by an abstraction layer called *netdev*. So Packets might come from DPDK packet I/O library, a Linux AF\_PACKET socket API, or in our case, the AF\_XDP socket interface, as long as each mechanism implements its own *netdev* interface. Once *dpif-netdev* receives a packet, it follows the same mechanism doing parse, lookup the flow table, and apply actions to the packet.

Figure 5 shows the architecture of userspace OVS with AF\_XDP. We implement a new *netdev* type for AF\_XDP, which receives and transmits packets using the XSK. We insert a XDP program and a eBPF map which interacts with

XDP program to forward packets to the AF\_XDP socket. Once the AF\_XDP *netdev* receives a packet, it passes the packet to the *dpif-netdev* for packet processing.

### 4.2 AF\_XDP netdev configuration

When users attach a AF\_XDP *netdev* to an OVS bridge, for example, by issuing the following commands:

```
ovs-vsctl add-br br0
ovs-vsctl add-port br0 eth0 -- \
    set int eth0 type="afxdp"
```

*ovs-vswitch* does the following steps to bring up the AF\_XDP *netdev*:

1. Attach a XDP program to the *netdev*’s queue: The XDP program OVS attaches is fixed and consists of only a few line of code, which receives the packet and calls the `bpf_redirect_map()` helper function with the XSK eBPF maps and key equals zero.
2. Create a AF\_XDP socket: Call `socket()` syscall to create a XSK, set up its Rx and Tx ring buffer, allocate a *umem* region, and set up Fill/Completion ring of the *umem*.
3. Load and configure the XSK eBPF map: The XSK eBPF maps consists of key value pairs, where key is an u32 index and value is the file descriptor of the XSK. *ovs-vswitchd* simply programs one entry to the map with key equals zero and the file descriptor, *fd*, of the XSK as its value. As a result, the XDP program calling `bpf_redirect_map` with key=0 will forwards the packet to the XSK.
4. Populate the *umem* Fill ring: Get a couple of *umem* elements and place into Fill ring.

On the other hand, when a AF\_XDP *netdev* is detached or closed by user, *ovs-vswitchd* closes the XSK socket, free the *umem* memory region, and unload the eBPF program and map.

In order to properly program Rx/Tx/Fill/Completion rings, we implement a *umem* memory management layer, call *umempool*. Basically, it’s a data structure maintaining the unused/available elements in *umem*, and GET and PUT access APIs.

### 4.3 Packet Reception

Figure 6 shows how *ovs-vswitchd* sets up the Fill ring and the Rx ring for receiving packets from XSK. For simplicity to demonstrate how AF\_XDP works, assume that there are only eight *umem* buffers, with each buffer’s size equals 2KB (?). Initially at step 1, *ovs-vswitchd* fills four available *umem* elements into the Fill ring and waits for incoming packets. When there are incoming packets, at step 2, the Fill ring’s four buffer elems have been consumed and moved to the Rx ring. In order to keep receiving packets, *ovs-vswitchd* gets another four available *umem* elements from the *umempool*, and fills into Fill ring (step 3). Then *ovs-vswitchd* creates the metadata needed for the four packet buffer {1, 2, 3, 4}, i.e., struct *dp\_packet* and struct *dp\_packet\_batch*, and

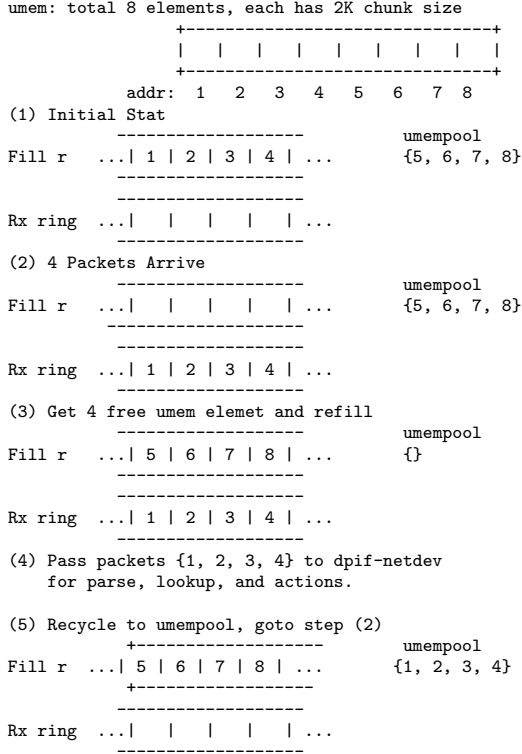


Figure 6: An example of how OVS programs the Fill ring and Rx ring when processing incoming AF\_XDP packets.

passes to the *dpif-netdev* layer for parse, lookup and action executions. Finally, when *ovs-vswitchd* finishes processing the umem buffer, a recycle mechanism is triggered to place this buffer back to umempool (step 5). Step 5 makes sure that there are always available elements in Fill ring, so that the underlying XDP program in kernel can keep processing packets while the userspace *ovs-vswitchd* is processing the previous received packets on Rx ring. When step 5 finishes, *ovs-vswitchd* goes back to step 2, waiting for new packets.

#### 4.4 Packet Transmission

Figure 7 shows the process for sending packets to the XSK. Assuming that *ovs-vswitch* has one bridge and two ports: *eth1* and *eth2*. And there is a flow entry showing *in\_port=eth1, ..., actions=..., output:eth2*, meaning to forward packets received from *eth1* to *eth2*. And both *eth1* and *eth2* are configured with AF\_XDP support.

Initially, assume *ovs-vswitchd* receives four packets {1, 2, 3, 4} from *eth1*'s XSK To send to *eth2* using *eth2*'s XSK, *ovs-vswitchd* first gets four packet buffers, {4, 5, 6, 7} from *eth2*'s umempool and copies the packet data from *eth1*'s umem to *eth2*'s {4, 5, 6, 7}. Then TX descriptors for the four packets are created and placed into *eth2*'s Tx ring (step 2). At step 3, *sendmsg* syscall is issued to signal the kernel to start transmit. As the send in XSK is asynchronos and *sendmsg* syscall only return return zero when no error, *ovs-vswitch* polls the COMPLETION ring to make sure these four packets have been sent out (step 4). Once the four

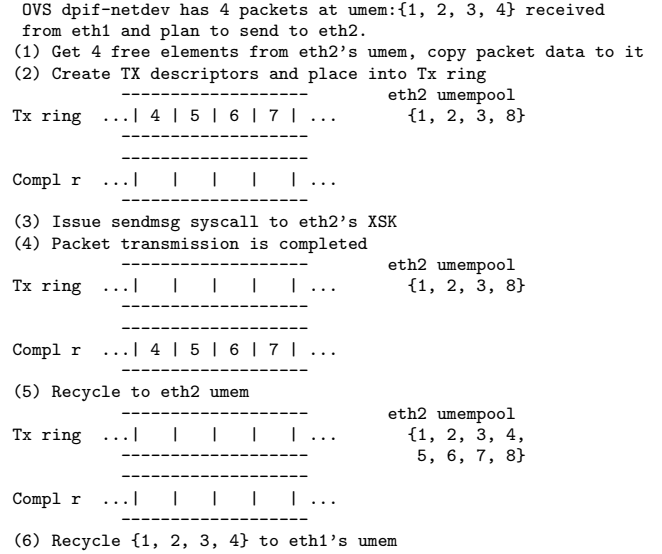


Figure 7: An example of how OVS programs the COMPLETION ring and Tx ring when processing incoming AF\_XDP packets from one netdev and sending to another netdev.

packets' descriptors show up at the COMPLETION ring, at step 5, *ovs-vswitchd* recycles their umem elements back to *eth2*'s umempool. In addition, the original four packet buffers from *eth1*, {1, 2, 3, 4}, are also recycled back to *eth1*'s umempool.

#### 4.5 Performance Evaluation

All of our performance results use a hardware test bed consisting of two Intel Xeon E5 2440 v2 1.9GHz servers, each with 1 CPU socket and 8 physical cores with hyperthreading enabled. One server, the target server, has an Intel 40GbE XL710 single port NIC, and the other server, the source server, has a Netronome NFP-4000 40GbE device. The target server runs Linux kernel 4.19-rc4, with *i40e* driver supporting the AF\_XDP zero copy mode [11, 12]. We installed OVS-AFXDP on the target server, and used the source server to generates 64-byte single UDP flow packets at the rate of 19 Mpps using the DPDK library. On the target server, for demonstrating the best performance, we disabled the Intel Spectre and Meltdown fixes [9, 21].

For all our experiments, we use a microbenchmark program, called *xdpsock*, as the baseline to compare with OVS-AFXDP implementation. *xdpsock* is an AF\_XDP sample program doing no packet processing, and can be configured to do simply dropping all packets, *rxdrop*, or forwarding the packet to the same port as it receives, *l2fwd*. In our testbed, we measured 19Mpps for *xdpsock-rxdrop* and 17Mpps for *xdpsock-l2fwd*. For OVS-AFXDP, we conduct similar two experiments, but with OVS's OpenFlow rule installed as below:

- OVS-AFXDP *rxdrop*: Install a single OpenFlow rule to drop every packets, e.g., *in\_port=eth1, actions=drop*.



- **OVS-AFXDP l2fwd:** Install a single OpenFlow rule to forward packet to the same port as it receives, e.g., `in_port=eth1, actions=set_fields:eth2->in_port, output:eth1`.

Additionally, *AF\_XDP* provides three operation modes, from slowest to fastest: *skb mode*: works on devices using generic XDP [16], *driver mode*: works on devices with XDP support, and *zero-copy driver mode*: works on devices with XDP\_XDP zerocopy support. For all our experiments, we use the zero-copy driver mode for showing the best performance.

#### 4.5.1 PMD netdev

Our initial prototype shows pretty terrible performance, only 0.5Mpps for *rxdrop*. We observe that when dropping/forwarding packets under OVS-AFXDP, two CPUs show up 100% utilization:

- *ovs-vswitchd*: This is the process keeps doing the send and receive steps in Figure 6 and 7.
- *ksoftirqd/core\_id*: This is the kernel software interrupt thread handling the incoming packets, triggering XDP program to pass packets to the XSK, and also processing transmission.

We investigate using Linux *perf* and our first fix is to enable OVS's PMD-mode, Poll-Mode-Driver, to the *afxdp* netdev.

In OVS, a non-pmd mode netdev does packet reception by putting all the receiving netdev's file descriptors, *fds*, together and *ovs-vswitchd* polls them when there is an *fd* ready to perform I/O. As a result, the *fd* of the XSK is shared with other *fds*, and we observed that the poll system call has pretty high overhead.

Applying OVS's PMD netdev avoids these problems and improves the *rxdrop* performance from 0.5Mpps to 3Mpps. Ideally, receiving packets from XSK should not need to context switch into kernel as mentioned in steps 6. So an ideal implementation should show minimal context switches with most of the CPU time stays in userspace. When enabling PMD netdev for *afxdp*, *ovs-vswitch* can be configured to create a dedicated thread for the packet processing. In OVS-AFXDP, we create a thread for each XSK's receive queue and the thread keeps polling the RX ring for new packets. Each round of receive polling processes a batch of packets, up to a maximum of 32 packets. In addition, we enable 1GB huge memory page support to reduce the page fault overhead.

#### 4.5.2 Memory Management and Locks

For every stage of optimizations, we use Linux *perf* extensively, e.g., *perf stat* and *perf record/report*. With the above new design, we observe the new bottleneck is at the umempool APIs we introduce, as well as at the packet metadata allocation, *struct dp\_packet*, for every received packet. We introduce two major APIs, *umem\_elem\_get()*, which gets *N* free element from the umempool, and *umem\_elem\_put()*, which

places back the free umem buffer to the umempool, similar to the concept of producer (*put*) and consumer (*get*). We implemented three different data structures of umempool as below to compare their performance.

- **FILO-list\_head**: We reversed first 8-byte of the umem buffer as a next pointer, pointing to the next available element in umempool, and implement FIFO access *get/set* APIs. The *list\_head* pointer always points to the first available umem element.
- **FIFO-ptr\_ring**: Similar to Linux kernel's *ptr\_ring*, an array of elements are allocated in continuous memory region. Consumer takes elements from the tail pointer and when placing back, producer, puts them into where head pointer points to.
- **FILO-ptr\_array**: Similar to Linux kernel's *skb\_array* [20], an array of elements are allocated in continuous memory region, but both consumer and producer take elements from beginning of the array.

Although we allocate one umem per netdev, there might be multiple queues per netdev sharing the same umem. As a result, the above three data structures require a mutex lock before accessing umem freelist. Linux *perf* reports *pthread* mutex lock related APIs as ones of the top CPU utilization functions. We change our design by 1) allocating per-queue umem region and 2) allocating one pmd thread per queue. As a result, no lock is needed because each queue has only one thread and its own set of umem elements.

#### 4.5.3 Metadata Allocation

Moving forward, Linux *perf* shows that the packet metadata allocation takes a lot of CPU cycles, i.e., *dp\_packet\_init()*, *dp\_packet\_set\_data()*. So instead of allocating packet metadata at packet reception time, we pre-allocate the packet metadata and implement two data structures to compare their performances:

- **Embedding in packet buffer**: Since we already allocate 2K chunk for each umem packet buffer, we reserve the first 256-byte in each umem element as *struct dp\_packet* and initialize the *dp\_packet* as much as we can at allocation time. This is similar to the DPDK mbuf design [10], where a single memory buffer is used for both packet data and metadata.
- **Separate from packet buffer**: This design simply allocates a continuous memory region storing an array of packet metadata, and initialize them as much as we can.

With the above design change, we found that using the FILO-ptr\_array in section 4.5.2 with separate from packet buffer design yields the best performance. Largely due to both data structures have better spatial locality and more batching friendly, when all data are allocated together. For example, setting up 32 packet metadatas in an array definitely incurs less cache misses than setting up in 32 elements

Projects	xdpsock	OVS-AFXDP
rxdrop	19Mpps	19Mpps
l2fwd	17Mpps	14Mpps

Table 4: Performance comparison of the xdpsock and OVS-AFXDP.

in umem. And getting 32 free umem elements from ptr\_array has similar benefits. With the above decision, the OVS rx-drop shows around 19Mpps, closed to the baseline xdpsock rxdrop performance.

#### 4.5.4 Batching Send Syscall

We continued measuring the performance of OVS-AFXDP l2fwd and observed only 4Mpps, compared to 17Mpps baseline xdpsock-l2fwd. We found that the OVS pmd thread under rxdrop has much fewer context switches compared to the l2fwd, indicating that the pmd process spends much more time in kernel space than in userspace. By using strace, we saw that the OVS-AFXDP l2fwd experiment calls sendto system call at very high frequency, because from Figure 7, we design to check the success of send (step 4) immediately after issuing send (step 3). We change the design by calling sendmsg syscall (step 3) only when TX ring is closed to full, e.g., when 3/4 ring elements have been used. In specific case, instead of issuing sendmsg syscall for a batch of 32 packets and making sure they are done, we only issue send when there are 512 outstanding packets. With this change, the OVS-AFXDP l2fwd experiment shows around 14Mpps.

#### 4.5.5 Summary

Through the step-by-step analysis, the key to performance is to keep the process CPU time in userspace, and making sure the userspace process is dedicated to do packet processing. Moreover, standard optimization techniques such as batching is critical. Here we apply batching in a couple of places such as issuing sendmsg syscall, packet reception and transmission. In summary, OVS-AFXDP shows performance below:

Although there are still rooms for improvement, we are now working on making the patch upstream to the OVS code base for more people to use.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper describes two eBPF projects related to OVS: OVS-eBPF and OVS-AFXDP.

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