FaCT: A DSL for Timing-Sensitive Computation
Sunjay Cauligi, Gary Soeller, Brian Johannesmeyer, Fraser Brown, Riad Wahby, John Renner, Benjamin Grégoire, Gilles Barthe, Ranjit Jhala, Deian Stefan

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Abstract
Real-world cryptographic code is often written in a subset of C intended to execute in constant-time, thereby avoiding timing side channel vulnerabilities. This C subset eschews structured programming as we know it: if-statements, looping constructs, and procedural abstractions can leak timing information when handling sensitive data. The resulting obfuscation has led to subtle bugs, even in widely-used high-profile libraries like OpenSSL.

To address the challenge of writing constant-time cryptographic code, we present FaCT, a crypto DSL that provides high-level but safe language constructs. The FaCT compiler uses a secrecy type system to automatically transform potentially timing-sensitive high-level code into low-level, constant-time LLVM bitcode. We develop the language and type system, formalize the constant-time transformation, and present an empirical evaluation that uses FaCT to implement core crypto routines from several open-source projects including OpenSSL, libsodium, and curve25519-donna. Our evaluation shows that FaCT’s design makes it possible to write readable, high-level cryptographic code, with efficient, constant-time behavior.

CCS Concepts • Security and privacy → Cryptography; • Software and its engineering → General programming languages; • Theory of computation → Operational semantics.

Keywords domain-specific language, program transformation, cryptography
of assignments that operate in constant-time regardless of the values of secret data. For example, the readable

\[
\text{if } (\text{secret}) \ x = e
\]

which branches on a secret bit is replaced by

\[
x = (\neg \text{secret} \& e) | (\text{secret} - 1) \& x
\]

which, unlike the branch, executes in the same amount of time no matter the value of secret.

This is a sorry state of affairs. First, developers apply the recipes in an ad-hoc way, and any untransformed computation is left vulnerable to attack. Second, the recipes obfuscate the code, making it harder to determine whether the routine is even computing the desired value. Third, it can be tricky for developers to correctly apply the recipes. For example, an attempt to use a recipe to fix a timing attack vulnerability in TLS [39] led to the Lucky13 timing vulnerability in OpenSSL [2], and the purported fix for Lucky13 opened the door to yet another vulnerability [56]!

In this paper, we introduce FaCT, a domain-specific language and compiler for writing readable and timing-secure cryptographic routines. FaCT lets developers write readable code using high-level control-flow constructs like branches and procedural abstractions, but then automatically compiles this code into efficient, constant-time executables. We develop FaCT via four contributions:

1. Language Design. Our first contribution is the design of a language for writing cryptographic code. The language allows programmers to use standard control-flow constructs like if and return statements. However, the language is equipped with an information-flow type system that programmers can use to specify which data are secret. The type system prevents leaks by ensuring that secrets do not explicitly or implicitly influence the public-visible outputs (§3).

2. Public Safety. Our second contribution is the observation that not all programs are amenable to constant-time compilation. Specifically, we show that naive application of constant-time recipes can mangle otherwise safe programs, causing memory errors or undefined behavior. We address this problem by introducing a notion called public safety that characterizes the source programs that can be compiled to constant-time without introducing errors (§3.2.3).

3. Constant-Time Compilation. Our third contribution is a compiler that automatically converts (public safe) source programs into constant-time executables. The FaCT compiler is based on the key insight that we can exploit the secrecy types to automatically apply the recipes that developers have hitherto applied by hand, and can do so systematically, i.e., exactly where needed to prevent the exposure of secrets via timing. We formalize the compiler with two transformations, return deferral and branch removal, and prove that compilation yields constant-time executables with source-equivalent semantics (§4).

4. Implementation & Evaluation. Our final contribution is an implementation of FaCT that produces LLVM IR from high-level sources, and uses LLVM’s clang to generate the final object or assembly file. We evaluate FaCT’s usability with a user study, surveying students in an upper-level, undergraduate programming languages course at a U.S. university, where 57% of the participants found FaCT easier to write than C (compared to 15% who found C easier). We evaluate FaCT’s expressiveness and performance by using our implementation to port 7 cryptographic routines from 3 widely used libraries: OpenSSL, libodium, and curve25519-donna, totaling about 2400 lines of C source. The unoptimized FaCT code—which we formally guaranteed to be constant-time—is between 16–346% slower than the C equivalent. The clang-optimized FaCT code—which we empirically check to be constant-time using dudect [51]—is between 5% slower to 21% faster than the C equivalent, showing that FaCT yields readable constant-time code whose performance is competitive with C (§5).

We make all source and data available under an open source license at: https://fact.programming.systems.

2 Background

Some common C constructs—branches, returns, and array updates—can reveal secrets via timing channels. In this section, for each potentially dangerous construct, we explain: (1) how that construct could introduce bugs in real-world projects; (2) how developers must use recipes to avoid the dangerous construct; and, (3) how FaCT allows programmers to forgo recipes and write readable yet safe code.

Branching on Secret Values. A first class of vulnerability arises from directly branching on the value of a secret: attackers can often reconstruct control flow through a program, and thus secret condition values (e.g., because the true branch takes orders of magnitude longer to execute than the false branch) [48]. To avoid this type of vulnerability, developers manually translate branching code to straight-line code by replacing if-statements with constant-time bitmasks. Consider the following example from OpenSSL (edited slightly for brevity), which formats a message authentication code (MAC):

```c
for (j = 0; j < md_block_size; j++, k++) {
    b = data[x - header_length];
    b = constant_time_select(is_past_c, 0x80, b);
    b = b & ~is_past_cpl;
    b &= ~is_block_b | is_block_a;
    block[j] = b;
}
```

It’s hard to tell, but this snippet (1) iterates over plaintext message data, (2) terminates the message with standard-defined 0x80, and (3) pads the terminated message to fill a hash block—all while keeping data secret. To this end, even
the selection operator constant_time_select_8(mask, a, b) is a series of bitmasks: (mask & a) | (~mask & b).

Translating each line of this OpenSSL code to FaCT leads to drastically more readable code:

```c
for (uint64 j from 0 to md_block_size) {
    k += 1;
    b = is_past_c ? 0x80 : data[k - (len header)];
    if (is_past_cp1 || (is_block_b && is_block_a)) {
        b = 0;
    }
    block[j] = b;
}
```

With FaCT, the programmer declares the sensitive variables as used in the conditions as `secret`. After doing so, they are free to use plain conditional expressions and ternary operators to compute the final value of b. The FaCT compiler automatically uses the type annotations to generate machine code equivalent to the C example.

**Early Termination.** Both loops and procedures can terminate early depending on the value of a secret, thereby leaking the secret. A well-known padding oracle attack in older versions of OpenSSL exploits an early function return [60]: a packet processing function would decrypt a packet and then check that the padding was valid, and, in the case of invalid padding, would return immediately. An attacker could exploit this to recover the SSL session key by sending specially crafted packets and using timing measurements to determine whether or not the padding of the decrypted packet was valid. Similarly, if the number of loop iterations in a program depends on a secret, attackers can use timing to uncover the value of that secret (e.g., in the Lucky13 attack [2]).

C programmers again use special recipes, turning idiomatic programs into hard-to-read constant-time code. Consider the following buffer comparison code from the libsodium cryptographic library:

```c
for (i = 0; i < n; i++)
    d |= x[i] ^ y[i];
return (1 & ((d - 1) >> 8)) - 1;
```

This snippet compares the first n bytes of the arrays x and y, returning 0 if they are the same, and -1 otherwise. To avoid leaking information about the contents of the arrays, though, the loop cannot simply return early when it detects differing values; instead, the programmer must maintain a “flag” (d), and update it at each iteration to signal success or failure. While iterating inside the loop, if the values x[i] and y[i] are the same, then x[i] ^ y[i] will be 0, leaving d unchanged. However, if x[i] and y[i] are different, then their XOR will have at least one bit set, causing d to also have a non-zero value. After the loop, the code uses a complex shift-and-mask dance to collapse d into the value -1 if any bits are set, and 0 otherwise.

FaCT lets programmers avoid the “flag” contortions:

```c
for (uint64 i from 0 to n)
    if (x[i] != y[i])
        return -1;
    return 0;
```

With FaCT, the programmer can readily express returning -1 in the case of failure as the compiler automatically generates a special variable for the return value, and uses the `secret` type to translate returns-under-secret conditions into (constant-time) updates to this variable, producing machine code roughly equivalent to the C recipe above.

**Memory Access.** Memory access patterns that depend on secret data can also inadvertently leak that secret data. An attacker co-located on the same machine as a victim process, for example, can easily infer secret memory access patterns by observing their own cache hits and misses [32, 45]; alarmingly, attackers might even learn such information across a datacenter—or even over the Internet [23, 52].

To avoid leaking information via memory access patterns, developers rely on recipes that avoid accessing memory based on secrets. The following C code (from the “donna” Curve25519 implementation), for example, swaps the values of array a with array b based on the value of a secret (swap):

```c
for (i = 0; i < 5; ++i) {
    a[i] ^= x;
    b[i] ^= x;
}
```

To avoid leaking the value of the secret swap, the code always accesses both a[i] and b[i] at each loop iteration, and uses bitmask operations that only change them if swap is a mask of all 1-bits.

FaCT, again, makes such subterfuge unnecessary:

```c
if (swap != 0) {
    for (uint64 i from 0 to 5) {
        secret uint64 tmp = a[i];
        a[i] = b[i];
        b[i] = tmp;
    }
}
```

Once the programmer has marked swap as `secret`, the compiler will automatically synthesize masked array reads similar to those from the original Curve25519 code.

### 3 FaCT

FaCT is a high-level, strongly-typed C-like DSL, designed for writing constant-time crypto code. In this section, we describe the DSL and its type system, one that both disallows certain unsafe programs and specifies how the compiler should transform code to run in constant-time.\(^1\) We describe the type-directed transformations in §4.

\(^1\)The surface language as used by developers is slightly less verbose than the core language presented in this section. For example, our surface syntax allows procedures to be called in expressions; FaCT desugars such expressions into core language procedure-call statements. We refer to both the surface and core languages as FaCT.
As such, FaCT "programs" are organized as collections of expressions (e.g., OpenSSL), and not to be used as a standalone language. They can also be composed of a sequence of statements, which are themselves composed of expressions.

### 3.1 Core Language

FaCT is designed to be embedded into existing crypto projects (e.g., OpenSSL), and not to be used as a standalone language. As such, FaCT "programs" are organized as collections of procedures. As shown in Figure 1, developers can export these procedures as C functions to the embedding environment. They can also import trusted procedures. This is especially useful when using FaCT to implement error-prone glue code around already known-safe C crypto primitives (e.g., building a block cipher mode that calls an AES primitive).

FaCT procedures are composed of a sequence of statements (e.g., if statements, for loops, etc.), which are themselves composed of expressions. Both statements and expressions are mostly standard. We only remark on the more notable language constructs we add to make writing cryptographic code more natural.

#### 3.2 Type System

The most important feature of the FaCT language is its static information-flow type system. We rely on this type system to: (1) provide a way for developers to demarcate the sensitivity of data—whether it is secret or public; (2) reject unsafe programs, i.e., programs that are not information-flow secure or cannot be safely transformed to constant-time code; and (3) direct the compiler when applying transformations. Below, we give an overview of our type system and explain how it fulfills the first two roles; we leave the third for §4.
Like previous information-flow type systems [41, 42, 54, 61], FaCT decorates each base type with a secret or public secrecy label\(^3\). Figure 2 summarizes our base types; they are largely standard. Reference types wrap another base type and inherit its secrecy label; they are also access controlled, i.e., they can be read-only or read-write. In the FaCT surface syntax, we disallow recursively-typed references—only references of integer and boolean types are expressible. Array types, like references, inherit the secrecy of their base type; arrays have a size which is either a statically known constant or dynamically determined (*). Struct types do not carry a secrecy label; instead, each struct field is individually labeled.

Developers explicitly specify labels when they declare variables and procedures. FaCT’s type system, in turn, uses these labels to reject unsafe programs and specify how the compiler should transform high-level code that uses seemingly unsafe constructs (e.g., secret if-statements) to constant-time code. Below, we walk through our typing rules for expressions, statements, and procedures.

3.2.1 Expression Typing
FaCT’s expression typing judgment \( \Gamma \vdash e : \beta \) states that under the type context \( \Gamma \), which maps variables to their declared types, the expression \( e \) has the type \( \beta \). We write \( x : \beta \in \Gamma \) when variable \( x \) maps to type \( \beta \) in the context \( \Gamma \).

Figure 3 gives the typing rules for the most interesting expressions. The rule for \( \texttt{cselect} \), for example, ensures that (1) the result is at least as secret as all the arguments to \( \texttt{cselect} \) and (2) all the arguments can be cast to integers—since, internally, \( \texttt{cselect} \) may be implemented as a series of constant-time bitmasks. The typing rules for other constructs similarly preserve secrecy.

The type system also disallows certain kinds of unsafe computations. For example, we reject programs that index memory based on secrets: the rules for \( \texttt{T-Arr-Get} \) and \( \texttt{T-Arr-View} \) ensure that array indices are in-bounds. The in-bounds checks are highlighted, and detailed in §3.2.3.

3.2.2 Statement and Procedure Typing
FaCT allows developers to write code whose control flow depends on sensitive data. Unfortunately, not all such code can be safely or efficiently transformed. For example, to safely allow writes to arrays a secret-dependent index we must (transform the code to) write to all indices [38, 46, 50]; such a transformation would be expensive, and FaCT instead disallows such computations. As such, typing rules for statements and procedures rely on a secrecy context, which comprises a pair of secrecy labels \( pc, rc \) called the path and return context, respectively.

The path context label \( pc \) for a statement is secret if the statement is contained within—i.e., is control-dependent upon—a secret branch. Since a procedure caller’s path context must persist through to the callee’s path context, the initial path context label of a procedure is secret if it is ever called from a secret context; otherwise the initial path context label is public. We use \( \omega \) to map procedures to their initial path context labels.

The return context label \( rc \) for a statement is secret if the statement may be preceded by a return statement that is itself control-dependent on a secret value. A procedure’s return context label is always initially public. Thus, the secrecy context \( (pc \cup rc) \) for a statement represents whether the flow of control (to get to the statement) can be influenced by secret values. For example, if the conditional expression of an if statement is secret, then the statements of each branch are judged with \( pc = Sec \), and are thus typed under a secret context.

Statement Typing. FaCT’s statement typing judgment is of the form \( \omega, pc, \beta_r \vdash S : \Gamma, rc \rightarrow \Gamma', rc' \), where \( \beta_r \) is the return type of the procedure containing the statement \( S \). This judgment states that, given a type- and security-context defined by \( \omega, pc, \beta_r \) and initial \( \Gamma, rc \), the statement \( S \) (1) can be safely compiled into constant-time code, and (2) yields a new updated type context \( \Gamma' \) and return context \( rc' \). This typing judgment accounts for new variable declarations and ensures that the secrecy context influences subsequent statements. For example, if a return statement resides within a secret branch, then all statements executed after that branch must also be typed under a secret context, since their execution now depends on the return.

Figure 4 shows the most interesting statement typing rules. For example, (T-Ascw) checks that when updating a reference, the current secrecy context does not exceed the secrecy label of the value \( e_j \) being assigned. This ensures that secret data cannot be leaked via control flow. Rules (T-If) and (T-Ret) account for such secret contexts; the latter additionally ensures that the procedure cannot return a value more sensitive than specified by the procedure return type.

Rule (T-Fon) is more restricting: it ensures that secrets do not influence the running time of for loops by requiring that the loop bounds—and therefore the number of iterations—be public. The updated return context \( rc' \) must both be a fixpoint of the loop, and must be no lower than the original return context \( rc \). In practice, our type checker only assigns \( rc' \) to be secret if it cannot assign it to be public.

The typing for procedure calls given by (T-Call) is slightly more complex. In particular, this rule ensures that procedures can only be called with suitable inputs and checks that the output type is compatible with the variable being assigned. To this end, we ensure that if the procedure \( f \) has visible effects, then its initial path context \( o(f) \) must be at least the label of the calling context. This, in effect, ensures that in
The FaCT type system ensures that procedures can be transformed using constant-time recipes without giving up safety. Naively applying recipes can inadvertently form procedures, the initial type context (vacuously) has no preceding dependency on parameters. When typing procedures, the initial type context Γ is formed from the procedure’s parameters, and the initial path context pc is given by ω(f). The return context rc always starts as Pub, as the procedure body S (vacuously) has no preceding secret-dependent return statements. The return type βr is taken from the procedure definition. If the body S is well-typed under these initial contexts, then the procedure itself is considered well-typed.

3.2.3 Public Safety

The FaCT type system ensures that procedures can be transformed using constant-time recipes without giving up safety. Naively applying recipes can inadvertently introduce safety and security vulnerabilities while making the code constant-time. Consider the following procedure:

```c
void potential_oob( secret mut uint32[] buf , public uint64 i , secret uint64 secret_index ) {
    assume(secret_index <= len buf);
    if (i < secret_index)
        buf[i] = 0;
    ...
}
```

This code is memory safe as the branch condition ensures that we only update buf[i] when i is within bounds. However, the update is predicated upon a secret condition. To make the above code constant-time, we must ensure that the access to buf[i] happens regardless of that condition, or else the memory access pattern will reveal the secret. Consequently, the constant-time recipes—that we discuss in §4—would compile the code into:

```c
cond = (i < secret_index);
buf[i] = cselect(cond, 0, buf[i]);
```

![Figure 3](image-url) (Subset of) FaCT expression typing rules.

![Figure 4](image-url) (Subset of) FaCT statement typing rules.

![Figure 5](image-url) (Subset of) FaCT procedure typing rules.
Such a naive transformation introduces a potential out-of-bounds access. In other cases it can introduce yet different kinds of undefined behavior.

**Public Safety.** We avoid the above problem with the key observation that for a program to be amenable to constant-time compilation, the source must be **publicly safe:** it must be memory-safe and free from buffer overflows and undefined behavior using only public-visible information, i.e., the code must be safe even after removal of secret-dependent control-flow. We formalize the notion of public safety in FaCT’s type system by extending the type environment $\Gamma$ to track public-visible path conditions, using these conditions to check safety. In Figures 3 and 4 these public safety extensions are highlighted.

**Public Views.** We first define the judgment $\Gamma \vdash_1 e$ to mean that $e$ is immutable in $\Gamma$; that is, $e$ is only composed of constants, immutable variables, array lengths, or operations thereof. Next, we define the operation $\Gamma \land e$, which conjoins $\Gamma$ with a public view of the condition $e$; if $e$ is a public bool ($\Gamma \vdash e : \text{BoolPub}$) and $e$ is immutable ($\Gamma \vdash_1 e$), then $\Gamma \land e$ represents the environment $\Gamma$ with the additional assumption that $e$ is true. Otherwise, $\Gamma \land e = \Gamma$, i.e., conjoining $\Gamma$ with a secret condition does not add any new assumptions to $\Gamma$. Rules T-If and T-For in Figure 4 show how we propagate public views, tracking (public) conditions and loop ranges to use when type checking statements.

For cases where the public safety checker is incomplete, we allow developers to add assumptions directly to the environment $\Gamma$ with the assume primitive (Figure 1). This is useful for aiding the checker by, e.g., adding preconditions to a procedure.

**Checking Public Safety.** Finally, we define $\Gamma \Rightarrow e$ to mean that the conditions in $\Gamma$ imply $e$. This is checked via an SMT solver. We use this predicate in the expression typing rules T-Arr-Get and T-Arr-View (Figure 3) to check that memory accesses are never out of bounds. In the example program given earlier, since the expression $i < \text{secret} \_\text{index}$ is of type BoolSec, it is not added to $\Gamma$; thus the predicate $\Gamma \vdash i < \text{len} \_\text{buf}$ does not hold when typing the expression $\text{buf}[i]$, and the program (correctly) does not type check.

The FaCT type system also prevents undefined behavior from invalid operand values (not shown in Figure 3). For example, integer division has the additional requirement $\Gamma \Rightarrow e_2 \neq 0$, and the left- and right-shift operators have the requirement $\Gamma \Rightarrow 0 \leq e_2 < s$ where $s$ is the width of $e_1$.

4 Front-End Compiler

The FaCT compiler consists of two passes. The first pass is a source to source transformation—it compiles well-typed code into semantically equivalent FaCT constant-time code whose observable timing is secret-independent. The second pass is straightforward—it takes the secret-independent code and generates LLVM bitcode. In the rest of the section, we thus only describe and formalize FaCT’s transformation pass.

Since our type checker ($\S$3.2) already ensures that memory accesses, loop iterations, and variable-time instructions are secret-independent, the transformations need only make procedure returns and branches secret-independent. FaCT does this in two steps, return deferral and branch removal.

The first step replaces secret-dependent return statements by (1) creating a boolean that represents whether the procedure has returned and (2) conditioning all later code on that boolean to prevent statements from executing after the original procedure would have terminated. That is, return deferral converts control flow in terms of secret returns into control flow in terms of secret if's.

The second step turns all secret-dependent conditional branches into straight-line code. This includes both secret if statements in the original source as well as those generated by return deferral. Thus, by eliminating secret if's—the last source of secret-dependent timing—this transformation yields constant-time code.

4.1 Return Deferral

As previously mentioned, early returns that depend on secrets often leak information. Consider the following snippet:
we either do not transform the statement, or simply recur-

while the return value

S

S

S

The new notRet variable tracks whether or not the procedure would have returned, and any statement that could be executed after the return is guarded by the notRet variable. Finally, the actual return occurs at the very end of each procedure, returning the value stored in rval.

Transformation Rules. We formalize return deferral using three kinds of rewrite rules, shown in Figure 6. The first procedure-transformation rule $\omega \rightarrow f(x : \beta) \{ S \} : \beta_\gamma \rightarrow f(x : \beta) \{ S' \} : \beta'$ is used to rewrite the body $S$ of a procedure $f$ into a secret-independent body $S'$. (This is accomplished using the other two rewrite rules.) The second guarded-execution rule $\Phi, pc, rc \rightarrow S \rightarrow S'$ transforms a statement $S$, given a secrecy context $pc, rc$, into $S'$ by making implicit control flow (due to secret returns) explicit. Finally, the return-elimination rule $\Phi, pc, rc \rightarrow S \rightarrow S'$ transforms $S$ into $S'$ by replacing all secret returns with assignments. Below, we walk through some of these rules in detail.

1. Procedure Transformation. The Tr-Ret-Dec rule declares two special (mutable) variables notRet and rval that respectively hold the secret-dependent return state and the value to be returned. The return state notRet is set to true, while the return value rval is initialized to a default value for its type. The rule then eliminates all secret returns from $S$ and inserts a (deferred) return after, as the very last statement of the transformed body $S'$.

2. Guarded Execution. Rules Tr-Ret-Guard-Pub and Tr-Ret-Guard-Sec are used to transform statements that appear after any secret returns. Both of these rules first eliminate secret returns from $S$ to obtain $S'$. If the original statement $S$ is typed with $rc = Sec$, i.e., $S$ may be preceded by a secret return, then the rule Tr-Ret-Guard-Sec additionally guards the execution of $S'$ with the condition notRet.

3. Return Elimination. The bulk of the transformation is done by the remaining rules in Figure 6. We omit rules where we either do not transform the statement, or simply recursively transform any sub-statements. Rule Tr-Ret replaces secret returns by updating rval with the (deferred) return value and setting notRet to false, to signal that subsequent code should not be executed.

Rule Tr-Ret-Seq handles sequenced statements $S_1; S_2$ by guarding the execution of instructions in $S_2$ against possible secret returns in $S_1$. The rule first eliminates the secret returns from the first block to get $S'_1$. Next, it extracts the secrecy context $rc'$ produced by type checking $S_1$. Finally, the rule uses $rc'$ to derive a guarded version of the second statement $S'_2$.

The Tr-Ret-For rule handles secret returns inside loops. As control flow can jump back to the beginning of a loop, a secret return inside a loop body $S$ can affect the execution of the entire body, as in the following example:

```c
for (uint32 i from 0 to 5) {
    b[i] = 1;
    if (i == sec) { return i; }
    a[i] = 2;
}
```

Here, if $i == sec$ becomes true, the program must stop overwriting the elements in both $a$ and $b$. The rule accounts for returns in the body $S$ by using the secrecy context $rc'$ from type checking the body, and in turn, uses this to derive the guarded form of the body $S'$. In our example, the secret-dependent return makes the return context $rc' = Sec$, and so the entire body is guarded by notRet, to obtain the transformed program:

```c
for (uint32 i from 0 to 5) {
    // for-loop rule
    if (!notRet) {
        b[i] = 1;
        if (i == sec) { rval = i; notRet = false; }
        // sequencing rule
        if (!notRet) { a[i] = 2; }
    }
}
```

4.2 Branch Removal

Return deferral eliminates secret returns by introducing secret-dependent branches. In this section we eliminate secret-dependent control flow as the final step towards producing constant-time code.

To this end, FaCT replaces secret branches with constant-time selections. Consider the following snippet:

```c
if (sec1) { a[1] = 3; }
else if (sec2) { a[2] = 4; }
```

The updates to $a[1]$ and $a[2]$ are guarded by the secret values sec1 and sec2 and, therefore, produce memory access patterns that can reveal the values of those secrets when left untransformed—this is the classic implicit flows problem [54]. We eliminate the implicit flow in two steps. First, we track the control predicates that correspond to (the conjunction of) the secret-conditions. Then, we perform both memory writes, but use ctselect to preserve conditional semantics:
The transformation of this code must ensure that updates to `in` procedure may update that parameter’s value in a way that is forward: if a procedure takes a mutable parameter, the assignment into a re-assignment to a conditional. The remaining rules in Figure 7 remove branches from statements. Rule Tr-Br-If, for example, eliminates `secret`-dependent conditional branches by saving the condition (resp. its negation) in the variable `m_i` (resp. `m_f`). The “then” statement `S_1` (resp. “else” statement `S_2`) is then transformed after conjoining `m_i` (resp. `m_f`) to the control predicate `p`. To prevent name collision when transforming nested conditionals, the `fresh` metafunction guarantees that all `m_i` and `m_f` variables have unique names. The declarations of `m_i`, `m_f` and transformed branches `S'_1`, `S'_2` are sequenced to obtain the final result.

4.3 Compiler Correctness and Security

In this section, we prove that our compiler preserves semantics and outputs constant-time procedures. To formalize these claims, we define an instrumented semantics that describes procedure behavior and leakage, i.e., the sequence of branches taken, the memory addresses accessed, and the operands to variable-time instructions. Intuitively, a procedure is constant-time if its leakage is not influenced by any secret values.

In particular, we consider a big-step semantics of the form $F : (\bar{v}, h) \xrightarrow{\bar{v}'} (\bar{v}, h')$ where $F$ is shorthand for a procedure $f(\bar{x} : \bar{\beta}) \{ S \} : \beta_r$. The term $\bar{v}$ represents the values of parameters, $h$ and $h'$ are heaps mapping pointers to values.
ψ is the final value of the procedure, and ψ is the leakage. The semantics is parametrized by an allocation function, and the proofs of the claims below rely on several (minor) assumptions on this function. We give these assumptions, formal definition, and complete proofs in Appendix C.

We first prove the correctness of our compiler, using the notation ω ⊢ F → F’ to denote the combined return deferral and branch removal transformations. Compiler correctness states that the compiler preserves the meaning of well-typed statements. To account for new references and variables that are introduced by the compiler pass itself, we show equivalence of the final heaps h’ and h’’, i.e., for any pointer p’ in h’, there is an equivalent pointer p’’ in h’’ such that h’(p’) and h’’(p’’) are either equal values, or are themselves equivalent pointers.

**Theorem 4.1 (Compiler correctness).** If ω ⊢ F → F’ and F’ is well-typed, then F : (v, h) ↦−→′ (v, h’) implies that F’ : (v, h) ↦−→′′ (v, h’’) and h’ and h’’ are equivalent.

**Proof sketch.** By induction on the derivation. □

Note that our compiler correctness theorem does not make any claim about leakage. We separately prove that the compiler produces constant-time procedures. To this end, we first define the notion of a constant-time procedure.

**Definition 4.2.** A Procedure F where ω ⊢ F is constant-time iff for every pair of executions F : (v1, h1) ↦−→′′ (v1, h1’) and F : (v2, h2) ↦−→′′ (v2, h2’), we have v1, h1 ∼= v2, h2 implies v1 = v2, where ∼= is a suitably parametrized notion of equivalence (e.g., public or “low” equivalence [5, 9, 61]).

Much like CT-Wasm [61], we cannot prove that all FaCT procedures are constant-time—FaCT allows procedures to declassify secret data and call external procedures over which it has no control. We can, however, provide guarantees for a safe subset of declassify-free procedures, i.e., procedures that do not contain any declassify statements nor call other procedures unless they too are declassify-free (and not extern).

**Theorem 4.3 (Compiler security).** If F is declassify-free and ω ⊢ F → F’, then F’ is constant-time.

**Proof sketch.** We define two additional type systems that impose stricter constraints on programs, and prove type-preservation for return deferral and branch removal. We then conclude by proving that the final type system guarantees that programs are constant-time. It is important to note that these type systems are merely proof artifacts, i.e., type checking is not performed again after transformations.

Informally, the two type systems are incremental restrictions on the FaCT type system. The first type system, which we denote by τrd, rejects programs that contain secret returns; the second type system, denoted τct, rejects programs that branch on secrets.

We then establish type-preservation for return deferral and branch removal:

- If ω ⊢ F and ω τrd F → F’ then ω τrd F’.
- If ω τrd F and ω τct F → F’ then ω τct F’.

Both are proved by induction on derivations, using adequate ancillary statements for the induction to go through.

We conclude by proving that τct guarantees that programs are constant-time. The proof follows from a “locally preserves” unwinding lemma, stating that equivalent states yield equivalent final configurations and equal leakage. □

## 5 Implementation and Evaluation

We implement a prototype compiler for FaCT in ~6000 lines of OCaml. The compiler transforms FaCT source code into LLVM IR, which it passes to `clang` (version 6.0.1) to generate assembly or object code. The compiler uses the Z3 SMT solver [28] to check public safety assertions (§3.2.3).

We evaluate FaCT by asking the following questions:

- Is FaCT expressive enough to implement real-world cryptographic algorithms?
- Does FaCT produce constant-time code?
- What is FaCT’s performance overhead?
- Compared to C, does FaCT improve non-experts’ experience reading and writing constant-time code?

We answer the first three questions with case studies in which we integrate FaCT into real-world projects (§5.1). We find that FaCT is expressive enough to implement a range of cryptographic primitives. We use `dudect` [51] to empirically check that our implementations, including compiler optimizations, are constant-time. We find that, compared to optimized C code, unoptimized FaCT code runs 16–346% more slowly, while optimized FaCT code ranges from 5% slower to 21% faster.

We answer the fourth question with a study comparing user experiences reading and writing FaCT and C (§5.2). In sum, a plurality of participants found FaCT easier to read than C, and a majority found FaCT easier to write.

### 5.1 Case Studies

We integrate FaCT into three popular open source libraries by porting pieces of these libraries from C to FaCT:

- The NaCl secretbox API for symmetric-key authenticated encryption and decryption. We port the entire libodium (version 1.0.16) [29] secretbox API, including the two underlying primitives, the Poly1305 message authentication code (MAC) and the XSalsa20 stream cipher.
- The Curve25519 Elliptic-Curve Diffie-Hellman (ECDH) primitive for asymmetric key exchange. We port Adam Langley’s curve25519-donna library [35] in whole.
- The OpenSSL [44] `ssl3_cbc_digest_record` function used to verify decrypted SSLv3 messages. At its core, this function computes the MAC of a padded message without revealing the padding length. Our implementation invokes OpenSSL’s SHA-1 hash primitive as an extern (§3.1).
We choose these functions because they (1) are complex enough to exercise all of the FaCT language features; (2) implement a range of algorithms; and (3) demonstrate that FaCT can be used in different settings, from implementing individual procedures to large portions of libraries.

**Method.** We port in three steps. First, we port the C code to FaCT by translating C constructs to their corresponding FaCT counterparts. During this translation process, we label sensitive messages, keys, etc. as `secret`, and add `assume` and `declassify` statements as appropriate to ensure the code typechecks (§5.1.1); we also replace “bit hacks” (§2) with high-level FaCT constructs (e.g., `if`). Second, we check the correctness of our ports using each library’s test harness, and we empirically check that the ports are constant-time using dudect (§5.1.2). Finally, we use each library’s benchmarking suite to compare our ports to the C implementations (§5.1.3).

### 5.1.1 Expressiveness

Table 1 summarizes our ports. FaCT implementations are at worst ∼10% longer than the corresponding C code. Much of the extra length is because FaCT does not have a macro system; instead, we translated macro definitions and then manually expanded them. (We note that it would be straightforward to instead use the C preprocessor with FaCT.) FaCT code is also more verbose than C when processing buffers: since FaCT has no pointer arithmetic, FaCT code must use extra variables to track offsets into arrays.

Ports make sparing use of `extern`, `declassify`, and `assume`. For example, our ports use `assume` to help the public safety verifier track values through memory and reason across procedure and language boundaries. We `declassify` in two cases: in libodium `secretbox` decryption and in OpenSSL MEE-CBC verification; these declassifications are permitted by the libraries’ respective attacker models [19, 26, 36]. Finally, we use `extern` to invoke existing primitives (e.g., OpenSSL’s SHA-1 implementation).

### 5.1.2 Security

We prove that FaCT’s transformations produce constant-time code (§4.3), but this applies only to the unoptimized LLVM IR produced by the FaCT compiler. Since we use clang to generate optimized object code, an LLVM optimization pass might break FaCT’s constant-time guarantees.

To empirically check that our case study implementations run in constant-time, even after optimization, we use the dudect [51] analysis tool. At a high level, dudect tests for constant-time execution by running the code under test for a large number of iterations and collecting timing information using the CPU’s cycle counters. It then tests the collected timing information for statistically significant variation in execution time that are correlated with changes to secret inputs. In our evaluation, we configure dudect to collect 50 million measurements for each benchmark. It finds no statistically significant timing variation.

Several other works concerned with constant-time crypto implementation [8, 51, 55, 61] have reported using dudect. In our testing, we found the tool to quickly and reliably find timing differences in buggy code. We note, however, that dudect is only a check—not a proof—of constant-time behavior; we discuss further in Section 6.

### 5.1.3 Performance

Table 2 shows the performance cost of porting C to FaCT. We benchmark each implementation on an Intel i7-6700K at 4GHz with 64GB of RAM using clang 6.0.1. We compare both unoptimized and optimized FaCT implementations with C implementations that are compiled at the corresponding project’s default optimization level. Our optimized FaCT code uses the same optimization flags as the C code.

For libodium and curve25519-domna, we use the library’s benchmarking suites. We measure the mean of ∼24 and ∼217 iterations, respectively, and report the median of five such measurements. For the OpenSSL implementations, we use OpenSSL’s `s_server` and `s_client` commands to measure throughput when transferring 256MB, 1GB, and 4GB files. We compute the median throughput of five transfers at

---

1. And to procedures that do not use `declassify`.
2. For OpenSSL, `−O3`; for other projects, `−O2`.

---

**Table 1.** Case study summary: lines of code (per `cloc`) and uses of `assume` (#A), `declassify` (#D), and `extern` (#E).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case study</th>
<th>Lines of code</th>
<th>#A</th>
<th>#D</th>
<th>#E</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>libodium secretbox</td>
<td>984</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>curve25519-donna</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OpenSSL record validate</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OpenSSL MEE-CBC</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2.** Overhead of FaCT ports compared to optimized C, for each benchmark. `secretbox` results are for encryption and decryption overhead, respectively.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benchmark</th>
<th>% Overhead of FaCT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unoptimized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><code>secretbox</code> (reference)</td>
<td>345.57/373.49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><code>secretbox</code> (vectorized)</td>
<td>427.21/427.09%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>curve25519-donna</td>
<td>144.42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OpenSSL record validate</td>
<td>30.13–35.16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OpenSSL MEE-CBC</td>
<td>16.15–31.97%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
We evaluate the usability of FaCT by conducting a user study: we asked them to describe the behavior of two functions. We believe the results largely translate to the version presented in this paper, because the surface language did not change significantly.

5.2 User Study

We evaluate the usability of FaCT by conducting a user study as part of an upper-level, undergraduate programming languages course at UC San Diego. Prior to the study, we dedicated three lectures to timing side-channels, constant-time programming in general, and constant-time programming specifically in C and FaCT. As an optional assignment, students were asked to (1) explain the behavior of constant-time code written in C and FaCT, and (2) implement constant-time algorithms in both C and FaCT. Of the 129 enrolled students, 77 completed the study over a nine-day period. We describe methods and conclusions below; in Appendix B, we give further lessons from the study, e.g., compilation errors participants ran into frequently.

Method. The user study is a sequence of web-based tasks. For each task, the participant is first given a warm-up code comprehension question, whose answer is subsequently revealed. The participant is then given a second, related question. This question is repeated twice, in C and in FaCT; we randomize the order of the languages per participant, i.e., half the participants’ tasks are in C and then FaCT, and vice versa. On a given question, participants can repeatedly check partial answers for correctness; once finished, the participant submits a final answer, which can no longer be viewed or revised. A task is complete if the participant submits a final answer for both C and FaCT; we discard incomplete tasks.

The user study was built on an earlier version of FaCT which did not enforce public memory safety. Nevertheless, we believe the results largely translate to the version presented in this paper, because the surface language did not change significantly.

5.2.1 Understanding Constant-Time Code

To evaluate participants’ understanding of C and FaCT code, we asked them to describe the behavior of two functions. The first function takes two input buffers—a header and a message—and copies the header and message to an output buffer and adds padding up to a fixed size. The second function implements long division: it computes a quotient and remainder, writes each to an output buffer, and returns a status code indicating success or failure.

We graded participants on their ability to correctly describe each function’s behavior. In both cases, we find that participants showed slightly better understanding of FaCT than of C: for the first function, the mean score was 57% for FaCT and 53% for C; for the second, it was 40% for FaCT and 32% for C. Participants also reported a slight preference for FaCT: specifically, 31 participants found FaCT easier to understand compared to 10 that found C easier and 28 that reported similar difficulty.

5.2.2 Writing Constant-Time Code

To evaluate participants’ ability to write constant-time code in FaCT and C, we had them implement three functions:

- **remove_secret_padding**: given a buffer and secret length, this function removes any secret padding, i.e., sets every element of the buffer past the length to zero.
- **check_pkcs7_padding**: this function checks whether a supplied buffer contains a valid PKCS#7 [33] message.
- **remove_pkcs7_padding**: this function removes padding from a supplied buffer, if it contains a valid message.

Participants could compile their code, run a test suite, and, for C code, check constant-time correctness with ct-verif [5]. They could also give up on a task and move to the next one.

Table 3 summarizes our findings. Of the 68 participants that completed the first task, 62 submitted correct and constant-time FaCT code, and 49 submitted correct and constant-time C code. For the third task, 34 participants submitted correct, constant-time FaCT code compared to 24 participants for C. In the survey, 40 participants reported finding FaCT easier to write, 11 found C easier, and 18 found them similar.

We cannot draw conclusions from check_pkcs7_padding, because the task had a bug that incorrectly marked variable-time code as constant-time; only 16 of the 32 C submissions marked “correct” were constant-time. The bug was limited to this task, but because check_pkcs7_padding is required for remove_pkcs7_padding, some participants needed to correct their code to pass the third task.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Programming task</th>
<th>FaCT</th>
<th>C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>remove_secret_padding</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>check_pkcs7_padding</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>32 (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>remove_pkcs7_padding</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6 Limitations and Future Work

We think FaCT makes it easier to write constant-time code, but it is not perfect. Limitations and future work include:

**The type system.** The type system lacks polymorphism and flow sensitivity [42, 54], which reduces both expressivity and performance. For example, our type system cannot express a program that branches on a buffer’s public contents and then decrypts the buffer in-place, upgrading its label to secret. We leave such extensions to future work.

**The public safety checker.** FaCT’s public safety checker does not reason about mutable variables or properties across function calls. For example, indexing an array based on a mutable variable requires assume-ing the index is in bounds.

**The brittleness of constant-time behavior.** FaCT’s compiler only guarantees constant-time behavior for the LLVM IR that it produces. Crucially, this means that LLVM’s optimization passes and lowering to assembly can introduce variable-time behavior. Though many optimizations do preserve constant-time property [10], FaCT relies on dudect to empirically check that a piece of code is constant-time.

Sound, symbolic verification of constant-time behavior using ct-verif [5] would give much stronger guarantees. Unfortunately, ct-verif currently has limited support for declassification and vector instructions. Extending ct-verif to support these primitives and applying it to optimized FaCT code is future work.

**The evaluation.** Our evaluation of FaCT is preliminary and thus incomplete. For example, we relied on extern versions of SHA-1 and AES (§5.1) because we preferred to focus on porting higher-level OpenSSL functions with a history of timing attacks. Moreover, some of the low-level primitives we ported (XSalsa20, Poly1305, and Curve25519) were explicitly designed for ease of constant-time implementation [14, 15, 17]. Future work is expanding FaCT’s repertoire with potentially more challenging algorithms.

Finally, our user study has limited scope and involves only non-expert users; remedying these issues is also future work.

7 Related Work

This work supersedes an initial design we previously described in [24]. In particular, we present a design and implementation of a DSL for writing constant-time crypto, provide a formal semantics and security guarantees for FaCT, and evaluate FaCT on several dimensions; in [24] we outlined the vision for such a DSL. Our implementation and formalization efforts revealed insights previously missed in [24]—e.g., the need for public safety (§3.2.3) and challenges with using ct-verif [5] to verify code with inline declassifications. At the same time, in this paper, we did not explore parts of the design space outlined in [24]—e.g., we do not expose some hardware-specific instructions like add-with-carry, which could simplify asymmetric-key crypto implementations.

**Domain-Specific Languages.** There are several efforts designing DSLs for implementing cryptographic primitives and protocols. Bernstein’s qasm is a low-level portable assembly for writing high-speed crypto routines [16]; it does not distinguish secret data from public data, so does not prevent information leaks by construction.

Vale [21] and Jasmin [3] are DSLs for writing and verifying high-performance assembly code. Vale developers write platform-independent assembly code and specify the target architecture; the Vale compiler uses Dafny to verify semantics and non-interference. Jasmin allows developers to use architecture-specific instructions alongside higher-level code, and the verified Jasmin compiler rejects non-constant-time programs. Low* is a higher-level, embedded (in F*) DSL that compiles to verified constant-time C [49]. The verified NaCl [18] library, HACL* [67], is written in Low*. CT-Wasm [61] is a formally verified extension to the WebAssembly language [62] for writing crypto code in the browser. CT-Wasm uses a strict label-based type system to enforce its constant-time policy. These languages provide support for high-level control flow constructs and procedures, but they require developers to manually write constant-time code.

Constant-Time Toolkit (CTTK) is a C library [47] that follows recipes in [27, 48] to provide functions—including low-level constant-time primitives—for crypto libraries, but developers must compose these low-level blocks.

**Verification.** There is a growing body of work on both building verified cryptographic implementations and verifying existing libraries. Bhargavan et. al verify an implementation of TLS, including low-level cryptographic primitives [20]. Barthe et. al [9] verify constant-time properties of various PolarSSL implementations. Ye et. al [64] verify the mbedTLS implementation of HMAC-DRBG. Appel [7] and Beringer et. al [12] respectively verify OpenSSL’s implementation of SHA-256 and HMAC. Tsai et. al [59] verify core parts of X25519. Almeida et. al [4] verify AWS Lambda’s s2n MEE-CBC implementation (after identifying a vulnerability); they also verify security properties of NaCl libraries [6]. Erbsen et. al [31] synthesize and verify elliptic curve implementations from high-level descriptions. Almeida et. al develop ct-verif [5] and verify constant-time properties of several cryptographic algorithms. Many of these verification efforts are specific to the projects being analyzed. Additionally, developers still bear the burden of manually writing constant-time code, which FaCT aims to alleviate.

**General Techniques for Eliminating Timing Channels.** FaCT uses an information flow control type system to eliminate programs that may introduce information leaks or are otherwise inefficient (or impossible) to transform to constant-time. Our label-based type system is a standard IFC type system [54] that borrows explicit mutability from ownership-based systems [25]. Previous solutions have also relied on type- and static-analysis techniques (e.g., [9, 30, 53, 58, 65]).
to address timing leaks. FaCT automatically transforms secret sub-computations into constant-time straight-line code. Our approach follows several previous efforts on eliminating timing channels via source code transformations [1, 11, 40, 43, 46, 50]. Most similar in ethos is SC-Eliminator [63]. This system takes as input a program and a list of secrets, and uses tag propagation to transform LLVM IR into its constant-time equivalent. Though both projects perform transformations, they use orthogonal approaches: SC-Eliminator repairs already-existing code, while FaCT is a language for writing such code from the start. Finally, many other efforts employ system-level techniques to eliminate and detect timing-channels [22, 32, 37, 51, 57, 66].

A FaCT Grammar

Program

\[
\text{program} ::= \begin{array}{l}
\text{fdef} \\
\text{sdef} \\
\end{array} \ldots
\]

Structure definition

\[
\text{sdef} ::= \begin{array}{l}
\text{struct name}\{ \beta x; \ldots \}
\end{array}
\]

Procedure definitions

\[
\text{fdef} ::= \begin{array}{l}
f(\vec{x} : \vec{\beta}) \{ S \} : \beta \\
\text{export } f(\vec{x} : \vec{\beta}) \{ S \} : \beta \\
\text{external } f(\vec{x} : \vec{\beta}) : \beta
\end{array}
\]

Statements

\[
\text{S} ::= \begin{array}{l}
\{ S \}\quad \text{block} \\
S; S \\
\beta x = e \\
\beta x = f(\vec{e}) \\
f(\vec{e}) \\
e ::= e \\
e \oplus e \\
\text{if } (e) \{ S \} \\
\text{else if } (e) \{ S \} \ldots \\
\text{else } \{ S \} \\
\text{for } (x \text{ from } e \text{ to } e) \{ S \} \\
\text{return } e | \text{return}
\end{array}
\]

Unary ops

\[
\Theta ::=\begin{array}{l}
\text{! boolean not} \\
\neg \text{ negate} \\
\sim \text{ bitwise not}
\end{array}
\]

Expressions

\[
e ::= \begin{array}{l}
(e) \\
\text{true} | \text{false} \\
n \\
x \\
\oplus e \\
e \oplus e \\
e ? e : e \\
\text{ctselect}(e, e, e) \\
\text{ULint}^n(e) | \text{Lint}^n(e) \\
[e, \ldots] \\
e[e] \\
\text{len } e \\
\text{zeros} (\beta, e) \\
\text{clone}(e) \\
\text{view}(e, e, e) \\
\text{ref } e \\
\text{deref } e \\
(n, \ldots) \\
\text{vector } e(n, \ldots) \\
\text{vector select/shuffle} (x : e, \ldots) \\
e.x \\
f(\vec{e}) \\
\text{declassify}(e) \\
\text{assume}(e)
\end{array}
\]

Binary ops

\[
\oplus ::= \begin{array}{l}
+ | - | \times | / | \% \\
== | != \\
< | <= | > | >= \\
& | && \\
| | || \\
\triangleleft | > > \\
\lll | >>>
\end{array}
\]

B User study

The user study enabled 77 people to write programs with FaCT; in doing so, we wanted to know: what did participants struggle with when writing FaCT code? We answer this question by analyzing program errors to see how participants failed at writing FaCT programs. We classify the errors into the following categories:

- **Syntax**: The program does not have valid syntax.
- **Type**: The program is not well-typed.
- **Label**: The program attempts to leak a secret value to a public variable.
- **Memory**: A segmentation fault occurred at runtime.
- **Correctness**: The program compiles and runs, but fails a unit test.

The occurrences of each error are reported in Table 4. The problem tasks PT1, PT2, and PT3 are remove_secret_padding, check_pkcs7_padding, and remove_pkcs7_padding respectively,
Table 4. The number of occurrences of each kind of error when users compiled FaCT code.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Error type</th>
<th>PT1</th>
<th>PT2</th>
<th>PT3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Syntax</td>
<td>277</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>423</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Label</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>613</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memory</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correctness</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>560</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

described in §5.2. The information we collected about syntax and type errors led to changes in the compiler and language design. For example, the majority of the type errors were due to incompatible integer types—we added implicit casting so that the compiler could assist the programmer. We also improved the compiler to prevent memory errors at compile time with the addition of the public safety checker (as described in §3.2.3).

We observe a total of 780 label errors—in FaCT this is a compilation error, but would result in a security vulnerability in languages (like C) without knowledge of public and secret values. This number is not surprising, as the participants were not used to programming with a defensive security mindset.

Participants encountered a large number of correctness errors as well. We observe a total of 821 correctness errors across the three programming tasks. The high number of correctness errors is not isolated to the FaCT tasks—we observe 1199 total correctness errors for the C tasks.

Additionally, we find that participants required fewer attempts as a whole to produce a correct FaCT program than a correct C program for remove_secret_padding and remove_pkcs7_padding. We graph the CDF of the number of correctness errors each user encountered per programming task in Figure 8. As shown, when writing FaCT code, 90% of participants encountered fewer than 5 correctness errors for remove_secret_padding and 4 for check_pkcs7_padding, compared to 12 and 13 for C code. The number of correctness errors are about the same per user for check_pkcs7_padding—90% saw fewer than 21 for FaCT and 20 for C.

We find a total of 250 other errors for the FaCT programming tasks. Individually, these errors occurred infrequently and are not unique or interesting to FaCT since they are common programming errors (e.g., passing too many arguments to a function).

C Deferred definitions and proofs

C.1 Semantics

We define the behavior of expressions, statements and functions using an instrumented big-step semantics. Informally, the big-step semantics relates initial configurations, final configurations, and leakages. Initial configurations are triples of

Figure 8. These graphs show the CDF of number of times a user failed the unit tests for each programming task in both FaCT and C.

the form \((C, \rho, h)\) where \(C\) is an expression, a statement or a function, \(\rho\) is an environment mapping variables to values, and \(h\) is a heap mapping pointers to values.
We further assume the existence of an equivalence relation \( \approx \) on heaps such that:

- \( p \) is a fresh pointer, i.e., \( p \notin h \)
- The associated value of \( p \) is \( v \), i.e., \( h'(p) = v \)
- Other pointers are unchanged, i.e., \( \forall p', h(p') = h'(p') \)

We further assume the existence of an equivalence relation \( \approx \) on heaps such that:

- \( \approx \) is stable by allocation: If \( \text{fresh}(h_1, v_1) = (p_1, h'_1) \) and \( \text{fresh}(h_2, v_2) = (p_2, h'_2) \) and \( h_1 \approx h_2 \) then \( p_1 = p_2 \) and \( h'_1 \approx h'_2 \).
- \( \approx \) is stable by update: if \( h_1 \approx h_2 \) then \( h_1[p \leftarrow v_1] \approx h_2[p \leftarrow v_2] \).

A final configuration is either a pair consisting of a value and a heap, or of an environment and a heap. In particular, the semantics of expressions \( (e, \rho, h) \xrightarrow{\approx} (v, h') \) returns a value and a new heap (creation of fresh reference). Here, \( \psi \) corresponds to the leakage of the evaluation of \( e \). The semantics of statements is given by two judgments of similar form: \( (S, \rho, h) \xrightarrow{\approx} (\nu, h') \) and \( (S, \rho, h) \xrightarrow{\approx} (v, h') \). These judgments correspond to statements that do not and do return values, respectively. Again, \( \psi \) is the leakage produced by the evaluation of the statement. Finally, the semantics of a function is modelled by a judgment of the form \( (f, \tilde{v}, h) \xrightarrow{\approx} (v', h') \), where \( \tilde{v} \) denotes the values of the parameters of the function, and \( v' \) is the return value (we only consider functions that return a value). Figure 9 presents the semantics. Rules are standard, with the exception of leakage. Primarily, array accesses leak the index at which they are accessed, conditionals leak their control flow, and other rules combine leakage of sub-computations according to evaluation order. Note that in the rules for conditionals and for loops we assume that the guard of the statement is identified by a unique label, which we record in the leakage.

C.2 Return deferral

We prove that return deferral is correct, i.e., preserves the behavior of programs; and secure, which we formalize as a type-preservation result.
**Type system and type-preservation.** We define a variant of the type system that only allows return statements in Pub contexts. The judgments are thus of the form \( pc, \beta_r \vdash S : \Gamma \rightarrow \Gamma' \) or \( \omega \vdash \beta_r f(\bar{x} : \bar{\beta}) \{ S \} \), i.e., the return context label is omitted. The typing rules for statements are given in Figure 10; rules for expressions do not change.

We prove that return deferral transforms typeable expressions (resp. statements and procedures) of the source type system into typeable expressions (resp. statements and procedures) of the \( \vdash_{rd} \) type system.

First, we prove preliminary lemmas.

**Lemma C.2.** If \( \omega, pc, \beta_r \vdash S : \Gamma, rc \rightarrow \Gamma', rc' \) then \( rc \sqsubseteq rc' \).

**Lemma C.3** (PC subtyping type system for return deferral). For all \( pc_1 \sqsubseteq pc_2 \), if \( pc_2, \beta_r \vdash S : \Gamma \rightarrow \Gamma' \) then \( pc_1, \beta_r \vdash S : \Gamma \rightarrow \Gamma' \).

**Proof.** By induction on \( pc_2, \beta_r \vdash S : \Gamma \rightarrow \Gamma' \).

**Lemma C.4** (Type preservation for return deferral). If \( \omega, pc, \beta_r \vdash S : \Gamma, rc \rightarrow \Gamma', rc' \):

1. \( \Phi, pc, rc \vdash S \rightarrow S' \) then \( pc, rc, \beta_r \vdash S' : \Gamma \rightarrow \Gamma' \)
2. \( \Phi, pc, rc \vdash S \rightarrow S' \) then \( pc, rc, \beta_r \vdash S' : \Gamma \rightarrow \Gamma' \)

where \( \Gamma = \Gamma[\text{notRet}, rual \leftarrow \text{REFW}[\text{BOOL}], \text{REFW}[\beta_r]] \).

**Proof.** We start by proving (2). Assuming that (1) holds for a given \( S \), we prove that (2) holds for \( S \). By case on \( rc \):

- If \( rc \) is Pub then \( \Phi, pc, rc \vdash S \rightsquigarrow S' \) is \( \Phi, pc, rc \vdash S \rightarrow S' \), and we can trivially conclude using (1).

- If \( rc \) is Sec we should prove \( pc \sqsubseteq \text{Sec}, \beta_r \vdash \Phi(\text{derf notRet})(S') : \Gamma \rightarrow \Gamma' \). By hypothesis we have \( pc \sqsubseteq \text{Sec}, \beta_r \vdash S' : \Gamma \rightarrow \Gamma' \) and we can apply the IF rule of type system 2 to conclude (where \( l \) is Sec).

We now prove (1) by induction on \( S \). The cases for (var-dec, assign, IF, for-range, return) are trivial.

- If \( S = S_1; S_2 \) then we have \( S' = S'_1; S'_2 \) where \( \omega, pc, rc \vdash S_1 : \Gamma \rightarrow \Gamma', rc' \)
  \( \Phi, pc, rc \vdash S'_1 \)
  \( \omega', pc, rc' \vdash S_2 : \Gamma' \rightarrow \Gamma'', rc'' \)
  \( \Phi', pc, rc' \vdash S'_2 \)

By induction hypothesis, we have \( pc \sqsubseteq \text{Sec}, \beta_r \vdash S'_1 : \Gamma \rightarrow \Gamma' \) and by (2) (using the induction hypothesis on \( S_2 \)) we have \( pc \sqsubseteq \beta_r \vdash S'_2 : \Gamma \rightarrow \Gamma'' \). Since \( rc \sqsubseteq rc' \) (by lemma C.2), we can apply lemma C.3 to obtain \( pc \sqsubseteq \text{Sec}, \beta_r \vdash S'_2 : \Gamma \rightarrow \Gamma'' \) and conclude.

- If \( S = \beta x = f(\bar{e}) \), we can conclude by induction hypothesis (\( f.S \) can be seen as a sub-statement of \( S \) since there is no recursion).

**Preservation of semantics.** We now prove the preservation of semantics for return deferral. Since the compilation introduces references and variables, the correctness lemmas should take this into account. Given a partial mapping \( m \) from pointers to pointers, we say that two values \( v \) and \( v' \)
are in relation for \( m, v \simeq_m v' \) if they are equal up to pointers.

Figure 11 defines this relation. The relation is extended to heaps \( h \simeq_m h' \) (rule Heap), if for all pointers \( p \in m \) we have \( h(p) \simeq_m h'(p(m)) \). The relation is extended to environments (rule Env): for all defined variables \( x \) in \( \rho \), \( x \) should be defined in \( \rho' \) and the associated values should be in relation for \( m \).

**Lemma C.5** (Preservation of semantics for return deferral). Let \( \rho_1 \simeq_m \rho_1'(\text{notRet}) = p_r \) and \( \rho_1'(\text{rval}) = p_v \) and \( h_1 \simeq_m h_1'(p_r) = \text{true} \) and \( h_1'(p_v) = \text{init}(\beta_r) \). If \( \Phi, p, c, r \vdash S \rightarrow S' \) and \((S, \rho_1, h_1) \rightarrow (\nu, h_2)\), then there exists \( v', m', h_2' \) such that \( m \subseteq m' \) and \((S', \rho_1', h_1') \rightarrow (v', h_2') \) and \( h_2 \simeq_m h_2' \):

\[
\begin{align*}
1 & \text{ If } v = p_2 \text{ then there exists } \rho_2' \text{ such that } v' = \rho_2' \text{ and } h_2' = h_2'(p_v) = \text{false} \text{ and } h_2'(p_r) = \text{false} \text{ and } h_2'(p_o) = \text{false} \text{ and } h_2'(p_i) = \text{false} \text{ and } h_2'(p_0) = \text{false} \text{ and } h_2'(p_1) = \text{false} \text{ and } h_2'(p_2) = \text{false}. \\
2 & \text{ If } v = \nu \text{, there exists } \nu' \text{ such that } \nu = \nu' \text{ and } v' = \nu', \text{ or there exists } \rho_1' \text{ such that } v' = \rho_1' \text{ and } \rho_1'(\text{notRet}) = p_r \text{ and } \rho_1'(\text{rval}) = p_v \text{ and } h_1'(p_r) = \text{false} \text{ and } h_1'(p_v) = \text{false} \text{ and } h_1'(p_o) = \text{false} \text{ and } h_1'(p_i) = \text{false} \text{ and } h_1'(p_0) = \text{false} \text{ and } h_1'(p_1) = \text{false} \text{ and } h_1'(p_2) = \text{false}. \\
\end{align*}
\]

Furthermore, if \( h_1 \simeq_m h_1' \) and \( \nu \simeq_m \nu' \) and \( v \vdash F \rightarrow F' \) and \((F, \nu, h_1) \rightarrow (v, h_2)\) then there exists \( u', m', h_2' \) such that \( u \simeq_m u' \) and \( h_2 \simeq_m h_2' \) and \((F', \nu', h_1') \rightarrow (v', h_2') \).

**Proof.** The proof is done by mutual induction on \( \Phi, p, c, r \vdash S \rightarrow S' \) and \((F, \nu, h_1) \rightarrow (v, h_2)\). The case for functions is a direct consequence of the case for statements. For statements, the interesting case is the one for sequencing, i.e., \( S = S_1; S_2 \). If \( S_1 \) returns in a Sec context then \( S_2' \) will not immediately return, but after its execution \( \text{notRet} \) will be \( \text{false} \). So \( S_2' = \text{if} (\text{notRet}) \{ S_2'' \} \) will immediately terminate. \( \square \)

### C.3 Branch removal

We prove that branch removal is correct, i.e., preserves the behavior of programs, and secure. For the latter, we define a new type system \( \tau_{ct} \), show that branch removal returns programs that are typeable with respect to \( \tau_{ct} \), and that typeable programs are constant-time.

**Type system and type-preservation.** The type system manipulates judgments of the form \( \beta_r \vdash S : \Gamma \rightarrow \Gamma' \) and \( \beta_r \vdash f(\tilde{x} : \tilde{\beta}) \{ S \} \). Notably, the path context label is omitted. Since we require that statements no longer branch on secrets, we can assume that the path context label is public throughout execution.

Figure 12 presents the typing rules for statements in \( \tau_{ct} \). Rules for expressions do not change.

We prove that branch removal transforms expressions (resp. statements and procedures) typeable in \( \tau_{rd} \) into expressions (resp. statements and procedures) typeable in \( \tau_{ct} \).

**Lemma C.6.** If \( \Phi, p \vdash S \rightarrow S' \) and \( \overline{\beta}, \beta_r \vdash S : \Gamma \rightarrow \Gamma' \) then \( \beta_r \vdash S' : \overline{\Gamma}_p \rightarrow \overline{\Gamma}_p \), where \( \overline{\beta} \) is \( \text{Pub} \) if \( p = \text{true} \), \( \text{Sec} \) otherwise and \( \overline{\Gamma}_p = \Gamma[\text{vars}(p) \leftarrow \text{BOOL}\;\text{Sec}] \) and \( \text{vars}(p) \) is the set of variables in \( p \).

**Proof.** By induction on \( S \). \( \square \)

**Typable programs are constant-time.** We start by defining an equivalence between heaps. We index equivalence by a partial mapping \( t \) from pointers to types. Note that such partial mappings are naturally equipped with a partial order relation: we write that \( t_1 \sqsubseteq t_2 \) if for all \( p, \beta \) such that \( t_1(p) = \beta \) we have \( t_2(p) = \beta \).

We define a relation \( \nu_1 \equiv_{\beta, t} \nu_2 \) between values saying that the two values \( \nu_1 \) and \( \nu_2 \) are in relation with respect to the type \( \beta \) and the partial mapping \( t \). The relation imposes that the values have type \( \beta \) and are equal according to the security level. For example, base values (booleans and integers) must be equal if their level is Pub but can be arbitrary otherwise. For pointers, the relation imposes that the two pointers are equal and the mapping \( t \) should associate a type \( \beta' \) such that \( \beta' \sqsubseteq \beta \). The relation \( h_1 \equiv_{t} h_2 \) is extended to heaps in the following way: the two heaps should be in relation for \( \equiv \), and for all pointers \( p \) such that \( m(p) = \beta \), the associated values should be in relation with respect to \( t \) and \( \beta : h_1(p) \equiv_{\beta, t} h_2(p) \). The relation is extended to environments naturally: \( \rho_1, h_1 \equiv_{t} \rho_2, h_2 \). The relation is extended
Proof. By induction on \( \Gamma \vdash e : \beta \). We do only the interesting cases:

- Case \( e = e_1[e_2] \), we have

\[
(e_1, \rho_1, h_1) \xrightarrow{\beta_1'} ([w_1; \ldots; w_k], h'_2) \\
(e_1, \rho_2, h_2) \xrightarrow{\beta_2'} ([w_1; \ldots; w_k'], h'_2) \\
(e_2, \rho_1, h'_1) \xrightarrow{\beta'} (n_1, h'_{1}) \\
(e_2, \rho_2, h'_2) \xrightarrow{\beta'} (n_2, h'_{2}) \\
\psi_1 = \psi'_1 + \psi''_1 + \text{Arr}[n_1] \\
\psi_2 = \psi'_2 + \psi''_2 + \text{Arr}[n_2] \\
\Gamma \vdash e_1 : \text{Arr} [\beta, e_2 ; e_1] \\
\Gamma \vdash e_2 : \text{Arr} [\beta, e_2 ; e_1] \\
\]

By induction hypothesis on \( e_1 \) there exists \( t' \) such that

\[
t' \equiv t''' \quad h'_1 \equiv_h h'_2 \quad \psi'_1 = \psi'_2 \\
[w_1; \ldots; w_k] \equiv_{\text{Arr} [\beta, e_2 ; e_1] ; t'} [w'_1; \ldots; w'_k] \\
\]

By lemma C.7, we have \( \rho_1, h'_1 \equiv_{\text{Arr} [\beta, e_2 ; e_1] ; t'} \rho_2, h'_2 \) and we can apply the induction hypothesis on \( e_2 \) to get:

\[
t'' \equiv t''' \quad h'_1 \equiv_{t''} h'_2 \quad \psi'_1 = \psi'_2 \\
n_1 \equiv_{\text{Arr} [\beta, e_2 ; e_1] ; t'} n_2 \\
\]

So \( n_1 = n_2 \) and by lemma C.7 we get

\[
[w_1; \ldots; w_k] \equiv_{\text{Arr} [\beta, e_2 ; e_1] ; t'} [w'_1; \ldots; w'_k] \\
\]

which allows to conclude \( \psi_1 = \psi_2 \). We conclude by using \( t'' \) as witness.

We now prove that typeable expressions and statements are constant-time.

Lemma C.9 (Typing constant-time expressions).

\[
\rho_1, h_1 \equiv_{\text{Arr} ; t'} \rho_2, h_2 \\
\Gamma \vdash e : \beta \\
(e, \rho_1, h_1) \xrightarrow{\beta_1} (v_1, h'_1) \\
(e, \rho_2, h_2) \xrightarrow{\beta_2} (v_2, h'_2) \\
\implies \exists \Gamma', \ h'_1 \equiv_{t'} h'_2 \\
\psi_1 = \psi_2 \\
\psi'_1 = \psi'_2 \\
\psi''_1 = \psi''_2 \\
\psi'''_1 = \psi'''_2 \\
\psi''''_1 = \psi''''_2 \\
V_1 \equiv V_2 \quad V_2 \equiv V_3 \\
\]

Proof. By induction on \( \Gamma \vdash e : \beta \).
By induction on $e$ we have

$$
\left( e', \rho_1, h_1 \right) \vdash e, (v''', h''')
$$

and use lemma C.8.

\begin{lemma}[Typing constant-time: statements].
\end{lemma}

\begin{align*}
\rho_1, h_1 \equiv_{\Gamma, t} &\quad \rho_2, h_2 \\
\beta_r + S : \Gamma &\rightarrow \Gamma' \\
(S, \rho_1, h_1) &\xrightarrow{\beta_r} (v_1, h_1') \\
(S, \rho_2, h_2) &\xrightarrow{\beta_r} (v_2, h_2') \\
\quad t &\xrightarrow{e} \psi_1 = \psi_2 \\
\quad v_1, h_1 &\equiv_{\Gamma, t} v_2, h_2
\end{align*}

\begin{proof}
By induction on $(S, \rho_1, h_1) \xrightarrow{\beta_r} (v_1, h_1')$
\begin{itemize}
\item Cases SEQ-RET, SEQ-NORET, and BLOCK are trivial.
\item Cases VARDEC, ASSIGN, RETURN, IF and FN-CALL follow from lemmas C.9 and C.7.
\item The last case, FOR, is almost a direct consequence of the induction hypothesis, the only difficult being to prove that the statement is well-typed:

$$
\beta_r + \begin{array}{l}
\text{if } *_e n_1 < n_2 \text{ then } \{ i = n_1 : S \}; \\
\text{for } *_e i = n_1 + 1 \text{ to } n_2 \text{ do } S \} : \Gamma \rightarrow \Gamma
\end{array}
$$

\end{itemize}
\end{proof}

We now prove that if the control predicate evaluates to true then the semantics of statements and functions are preserved.

\begin{lemma}[Preservation of semantics].
\end{lemma}

Finally, we prove that branch removal preserves the semantics of programs. The proof is performed in two steps. First, we show that if the value of the control predicate is false then the code does not modify the initial heap; it can only create fresh references.

\begin{lemma}
Let $m$ a partial mapping on pointers. Assume that $p$ is not trivially true (i.e., $p$ is not the literal true) and $\Phi, p \vdash S \rightarrow S'$ and $h \equiv_m h'_1$ and $\rho \equiv_m \rho'_1$ and $\beta_r + S : \Gamma \rightarrow \Gamma'$ and $(S', \rho'_1, h'_1) \rightarrow (\nu', h'_2)$ (i.e., $S'$ is safe). If $(p, \rho', h'_1) \rightarrow false$ then $h \equiv_m h'_2$ and there exists $\beta'_2$ such that $\nu' = \nu'_2$ and $\rho \equiv_m \rho'_2$.

Furthermore, assume that $p$ is not trivially true and $\omega + F \rightarrow F'$ and $\omega(f) = Sec$ and $h \equiv_m h'_1$ and $F$ is well typed and $(F', (\nu', false), h'_1) \rightarrow (\nu', h'_2)$. Then $h \equiv_m h'_2$.

\begin{proof}
By mutual induction on $S$ and $F$. The key point of the proof is to notice that if $p$ is not trivially true then the $pc$ used for type-checking is necessarily Sec, so there is no return statement in $S'$.
\end{proof}

We now prove that if the control predicate evaluates to true then the semantics of statements and functions are preserved.

\begin{lemma}
Let $m$ be a partial mapping on pointers. Assume $\Phi, p \vdash S \rightarrow S'$ and $h_1 \equiv_m h'_1$ and $\rho_1 \equiv_m \rho'_1$ and $pc, \beta_r + S : \Gamma \rightarrow \Gamma'$ and $(S', \rho'_1, h'_1) \rightarrow (\nu', h'_2)$ (i.e., $S'$ is safe). If $(p, \rho', h'_1) \rightarrow true$ then there exists $m'$ such that $m \equiv_m m'$ and $h_2 \equiv_m h'_2$ and $\nu \equiv_m \nu'$.

Furthermore, assume that $\omega + F \rightarrow F'$ and $F$ is well typed and $(F, (\nu, true), h_1) \rightarrow (\nu', h'_2)$ then there exists $m'$ such that $m \equiv_m m'$ and $h_2 \equiv_m h'_2$ and $\nu \equiv_m \nu'$. Else, if $\omega(f) = Sec$ and $(F', (\nu', true), h_1) \rightarrow (\nu', h'_2)$ then there exists $m'$ such that $m \equiv_m m'$ and $h_2 \equiv_m h'_2$ and $\nu \equiv_m \nu'$.

\begin{proof}
By mutual induction on $S$ and $F$.
\end{proof}

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