Understanding the Overheads of Hardware and Language-Based IPC Mechanisms

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Abstract

A recent surge of security attacks renewed interest in hardware support for isolation. Extended page table switching with VMFUNC, memory protection keys (MPK), memory tagging extensions (MTE) are just a few hardware isolation mechanisms that promise support for low-overhead, i.e., overhead that is approaching overhead of a function call, isolation in recent CPUs. Along with the restored interest in lightweight hardware isolation, safe languages made a leap towards practical, zero-overhead safety. Rust is a new systems language that offers language safety without garbage collection.

Both lightweight hardware mechanisms and zero-overhead language safety can be used to enforce the isolation of computations. However, as both technologies are still young, their relative advantages are still unknown. We study the overheads of hardware and software isolation mechanisms with the goal to understand their potential for fine-grained isolation of applications with the tightest performance budgets. We ask the following: What will be the overhead of hardware isolation in an ideal scenario—the address space switch takes zero cycles? And if the safety of the Rust language can lower the overhead of cross-subsystem invocations, can it on its own introduce overheads that might outweigh the advantages? To answer these questions we develop carefully optimized versions of inter-process communication (IPC) mechanisms in Rust and low-level assembly, and two identical (to the degree possible) versions of a DPDK-based network packet processing framework in C++ and Rust.

CCS Concepts: • **Software and its engineering → Communications management**; **Software safety**.

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1 Introduction

Despite significant academic interest [17, 69, 71, 72], for several decades performance of hardware isolation primitives remained a low priority for hardware architects. On x86 machines, segmentation was deprecated as part of the transition from 32-bit to 64-bit addressing mode leaving page tables to be the only available isolation mechanism. Today a carefully-optimized, page-based inter-process communication (IPC) mechanism requires 408 cycles (Intel) and 475 cycles (ARM) for a cross-subsystem function call invocation [48].

A recent surge of security attacks, however, triggered a renewed interest in hardware support for isolation. Extended page-table (EPT) switching with VM functions [42], and memory protection keys (MPKs) [42] provide support for memory isolation with overheads gradually approaching the overhead of a function call [33, 52, 56, 68]. The newest ARM CPUs introduce support for 16 byte-granularity isolation with memory tagging extensions (MTE) [3, 6], which is critical for enabling low-overhead software-fault isolation (SFI) implementations [45] and zero-copy exchange of data across isolated subsystems.

Along with the restored interest in lightweight hardware isolation mechanisms, safe languages made a leap towards practical, zero-overhead safety. Rust is a new systems language that offers language safety without garbage collection [43]. Rust enforces type and memory safety through a restricted ownership model, assigning a unique owner to each live object in memory. This allows statically tracking the lifetime of the object and deallocating it without a garbage collector. The runtime overhead of the language is limited to bounds checking, which in many cases can be concealed by modern out-of-order CPUs that can predict and execute the correct path around the check [21].

Both safe languages and hardware isolation mechanisms can be used for fine-grained isolation of small untrusted subsystems [5, 10, 30, 33, 39, 46, 55, 56]. As both approaches mature, questions of their practicality and relative advantages for isolation arise. On one hand, the overhead of switching the isolation boundary with a hardware instruction is becoming progressively lower, e.g., writing a `pkru` register that changes the tag of the page table introduces an overhead of only 20-26 cycles [33, 58]. However, it remains unclear what the cost of secure IPC invocation will be in an ideal scenario when the address space switch takes zero cycles. On the other hand, while providing low-overhead cross-subsystem invocations with an overhead of a function call, a safe language itself can introduce overheads that might outweigh the benefits of lightweight language-based isolation.

In this work, we explore advantages and disadvantages of safe and unsafe isolation approaches, especially for systems in which fine-grained isolation, and hence frequent cross-subsystem invocations are critical, e.g., browser plugins [61, 74], user-defined database functions [14, 66], network functions [1, 37, 40, 51, 59, 62], device drivers [26, 28, 67], storage systems [12], and kernel modules [11, 15, 27, 32, 34–36].

To understand the performance benefits of the two approaches, we develop a carefully optimized implementation of a hardware-based IPC mechanism that assumes a zero-cycle cost of switching the isolation boundary. We then perform a detailed analysis of the overheads involved in implementing a secure cross-subsystem function invocation in both unsafe C++ and Rust.

We find that the overhead of implementing a secure IPC with a zero-cost hardware isolation primitive remains high. Two inherent reasons are the need to save and restore callee saved general and extended registers and the requirement to switch to a new stack. Even if the cost of the hardware switch instruction drops to zero, a cross-subsystem invocation takes 178-209 cycles (Section 3).

In contrast to hardware-based IPC, safe languages provide isolation with an overhead of a function call [4, 8, 10, 29, 39, 55, 70]. The execution can continue on the same stack (safety ensures isolation of objects on the stack) and does not require saving and restoring general and extended registers (calling conventions save and restore registers between the caller and callee, and exception handling, i.e., *unwind*, mechanisms allow recovery from a fault in an untrusted subsystem). This significantly lowers the cost of a cross-subsystem invocation.

To understand whether safety itself introduces prohibitive overhead in real applications, we develop two implementations (one in C++ and one in Rust) of a network function processing framework similar to Netbricks [57]. We analyze the performance difference between C++ and Rust by developing identical (to the degree possible) implementations of several representative network functions. We find that while high-level Rust abstractions can introduce significant overheads, a carefully planned (with respect to performance) Rust code remains fast and executes within 4-8% of unsafe C++.

Our analysis shows that for systems requiring frequent boundary crossings a safe language is still beneficial even if the performance of hardware isolation mechanisms drops to zero. Moreover, high-level safety and type guarantees allow safe languages to provide high-level isolation invariants, e.g., *fault isolation* and clean termination of crashing subsystems [5, 10, 39, 55].

Of course, safety comes at the price of restricting development to a specific language, and a larger trusted computing base—the language itself, and a trusted compilation environment required to ensure the safety of third-party extensions [10, 46, 55]. We, therefore, hope that our analysis of hardware-based IPC implementations will help hardware designers to improve the performance of hardware isolation mechanisms even further. Specifically, we argue that one of the two main sources of overheads—saving and restoring general and extended registers—can be optimized in hardware.

2 Anatomy of Safe and Unsafe IPCs

Before diving into the analysis of language and hardware-based IPC implementations, we discuss the internal organization of both mechanisms. The IPC mechanisms which arguably were one of the hottest areas of system research accumulate a long history of innovation aimed at improving security and performance through a broad range of abstractions and implementation designs that spanned microkernels [2, 7, 20, 24, 30, 32, 38, 44, 47, 48, 52, 63], operating systems [9, 33, 54, 56, 64, 68], hypervisors [25], language-based operating systems [4, 29, 39, 55, 70], software fault-isolation (SFI) frameworks [13, 23, 45, 50], and interface definition language compilers [18, 31].

Unsafe IPC path Traditionally, IPC mechanisms require assistance from a privileged, ring 0, kernel code needed to switch the address space between the callee and the caller. The kernel was responsible for saving the state of the caller, enforcing security checks, switching the address space, and finally, switching the execution from the caller thread to the callee [44]. Most recent hardware isolation primitives, e.g., MPK [42] and VMFUNC [30], provide support for an *exitless* IPC path, i.e., it is possible to implement a secure IPC mechanism that avoids entering the kernel and transitions between the caller and the callee through a small trusted trampoline directly in ring 3 [33, 52, 68]. The ability to avoid the kernel on the critical path can significantly reduce the cost of the IPC (on modern x86 hardware, the system call required to enter and leave the kernel takes 96-140 cycles without KPTI mitigations [33, 56]).

To analyze the overheads of the minimal IPC path, we describe a minimal implementation of an exitless IPC (Listing 1). We assume a future hardware mechanism similar to MPK or VMFUNC that provides a way to instantly switch the address space between the caller and the callee with a non-privileged instruction (right now we replace such future instruction with a `nop`). Our IPC implements a *migrating threads* model of invocation [24], in which the caller thread enters the address space of the callee without the context switch. Specifically, the caller saves its state on the stack, switches into the address space of the callee with a hardware mechanism similar to `wrpkru` or `vmfunc`, picks a new stack inside the callee address space, and continues execution calling a callee function. To minimize the invocation cost, we pass a fixed number of arguments in registers following the C calling convention. We could have implemented a more general calling convention that uses memory to pass messages of arbitrary length similar to seL4 [44], but to keep our experiments concise we implement the simplest possible ABI. On the caller side, we first save extended registers with the `fxsave` instruction (lines 2–6) that takes a pointer to the memory location in the `rax` register (we allocate 512 bytes on the caller's stack which have to be 16 bytes aligned). We then save callee saved registers on the stack (lines 9–15) and zero out all general registers not used to pass the arguments and all extended registers (18–23). After that, we switch domain boundary executing a `nop` instruction under the assumption that the future hardware mechanism will have a one cycle overhead (line 31).

Inside the callee domain, we try to allocate a new stack from a pool of available stacks. We maintain a lock-free stack data structure from which we can de-queue elements with a single `cmpxchg` instruction. We first check if we have free stacks on the list by checking if the head of the list is empty (33–35) and then perform an attempt to dequeue one element (38–43). Here we assume that the global variable `RT_FREE_LIST` that maintains the head of the free list is accessible in the callee domain.

```
1     ; fxsave target must be 16-byte aligned
2     mov rax, rsp
3     sub rsp, 512
4     and rsp, -16
5     fxsave [rsp]
6     push rax
7
8     ; save callee-saved registers
9     push rbp
10    push rbx
11    push r12
12    push r13
13    push r14
14    push r15
15    pushfq
16
17    ; zero out registers (rax, rbx, rbp, rsp, r10-r15)
18    xor rax, rax
19    xor rbx, rbx
20    ...
21    xor r15, r15
22    ; zero out extended registers
23    vzeroall
24  %ifdef UNWIND
25    ; switch to kernel
26    nop
27    ; handle continuation stack
28    ...
29  %endif
30    ; switch to callee
31    nop
32  .try_getting_stack:
33    mov rax, [RT_FREE_LIST]
34    cmp rax, 0
35    jne .stack_available
36    ...
37  .stack_available:
38    mov r10, rax
39    add r10, CALL_NEXT
40
41    ; try to remove from free list
42    mov r11, [r10] ; .next
43    lock cmpxchg [RT_FREE_LIST], r11
44    jnz .try_getting_stack
45
46    ; set callee rsp
47    mov rsp, r10
48    ...
49    ; we are ready to call callee
50       ...
```

Listing 1. IPC path (Intel x86 ASM)

Safe IPC Path A safe language like Rust can provide isolation through the safety of a programming language. The language provides mechanisms to control access to the state of the program at module and class boundaries by specifying fields of individual objects as public or private. Isolated parts of the program have access to the state transitively reachable through public global variables and explicitly passed arguments. Control over references and communication channels allows isolating the state of the program on function and module boundaries enforcing confidentiality and integrity, and, more generally, constructing a broad range of least-privilege systems through a collection of object-capability patterns [53]. Recent systems develop support for dynamic loading of Rust extensions [10, 46, 55] hence enabling process-like development and execution environment in a safe language.

In a safe language, a minimal isolation boundary can be implemented as a private class or module [5, 46, 57]. In such a system the IPC mechanism is simply a function call invocation of a method exported by a protected subsystem. Naturally, this eliminates multiple overheads of unsafe IPC. First, the safety guarantees protect the general and extended registers between the callee and the caller, i.e., the calling convention saves and restores original values of the registers, hence there is no need to save and restore the registers upon entering an untrusted callee subsystem. Second, the execution can continue on the same stack, therefore eliminating the overhead of picking a new stack in the callee domain.

2.1 Unwind and Error Handling

The minimal IPC mechanisms presented above enforce confidentiality and integrity across isolated subsystems, i.e., one subsystem cannot read and write data of other subsystems. These mechanisms, however, provide no way of isolating faults across subsystems—a crash in any of the isolated subsystems halts the entire system requiring a restart.

A natural requirement for a practical IPC mechanism is to support fault isolation enabling recovery and progress of the system in case of a crash or termination of one of the isolated subsystems. We assume the following fault semantics. An isolated subsystem *crashes* and needs to be terminated when one of the threads executing inside it encounters a fault. A fault in any of the threads potentially leaves data structures inside the subsystem in an inconsistent state, making further progress of any of the threads inside it impractical (i.e., even if other threads do not deadlock or panic, the results of the computation are undefined).

To *isolate the fault*, the IPC subsystem should provide a mechanism to unwind the execution of a thread from a crashing subsystem returning an error to the caller. Note, that threads can call through a crashing subsystem, i.e., enter a crashing subsystem but then leave in a recursive invocation of another subsystem. Those threads should continue running until they try to return into the crashing subsystem, and at that point, they should *jump over* it returning the error to the caller.

Unsafe unwind To unwind execution of a thread from a crashing subsystem, our IPC code records the state of the thread right before entering a callee subsystem. Before entering the callee subsystem, we switch into the address space visible to the kernel (line 26).

To ensure isolation and provide support for unloading of crashing subsystems, the IPC code implements the following logic on each invocation: 1) The IPC code checks if the subsystem is alive before performing the invocation. If the subsystem is alive, the IPC records the fact that the thread moves between subsystems by updating its state. We use this information to unwind all threads that happen to execute inside the subsystem which crashes. 2) For each invocation, the IPC code creates a lightweight *continuation* that captures the state of the thread right before the cross-domain invocation. Specifically, inside the kernel subsystem we save the caller's stack pointer in a thread-local continuation stack visible to the kernel (we assume that each thread has a region of thread-local memory accessible from inside the kernel, for example, relative to the `gs` register). The register state of the caller is already saved on the caller's stack, therefore it is sufficient to save only the stack address. The continuation allows us to unwind the execution of the thread, and return an error to the caller. If we have to unwind the thread, the kernel restores the stack to the state captured by the continuation and returns an error to the caller.

Safe unwind In a safe language, unwinding is possible with native language support for catching exceptions. The benefit of exception handling is that the state of all registers can be restored by iterating over the stack frames that contain the saved value for each register. This eliminates the need for explicit register saving and restoring on each invocation and instead incurs the costs of unwinding only if the thread panics.

Rust 1.9.0 introduced support for catching panics, modeled after the Itanium C++ ABI. During the unwind process, a common *personality routine* is invoked repeatedly with information regarding the exception being thrown and the current frame in the calling stack that should be processed [41]. Based on the available information, the personality routine is expected to make the decision between unwinding further up the calling stack and handling the exception at the current frame (the "search phase"), perform cleanup actions to reclaim resources (the "cleanup phase"), or to finally execute the exception handler (e.g., the catch block) at the given frame. To restore registers to the state at the frame that can handle the exception, the unwinder relies on the debugging information embedded into the binary. A commonly used format on Unix systems is DWARF, in which instructions for restoring registers are present for each stack frame that may be unwound. Rust provides a set of OS-specific unwinder implementations as part of the Rust Standard Library (`libstd`), and OS developers working with the `no_std` environment must provide their own implementations.

3 Performance Analysis

We run our experiments on CloudLab [60] c220g2 servers configured with two Intel E5-2660 v3 10-core Haswell CPUs running at 2.60 GHz, 160 GB RAM, and a dual-port Intel X520 10GbE NIC. Linux machines run 64-bit Ubuntu 20.04 with a 5.4.0 kernel configured without any speculative execution attack mitigations (`mitigations=off`) reflecting the trend of recent Intel CPUs addressing a range of speculative execution attacks in hardware. In all the experiments, we disable hyper-threading, turbo boost, CPU idle states, and frequency scaling to reduce the variance in benchmarking.

3.1 Safe vs Unsafe IPC

We first analyze the overheads of safe and unsafe IPC implementations discussed in Section 2. Specifically, we compare four IPC implementations. First, we benchmark a minimal unsafe IPC which we described in Section 2: we assume a one cycle hardware primitive that switches the isolation boundary. We evaluate two different configurations of this IPC: with (`hw-fxsave`) and without (`hw-no-fxsave`) saving extended registers. Second, we implement a minimal safe IPC in Rust that utilizes the standard library and its unwind implementation to unwind from crashing subsystems, but provides no fault isolation mechanisms (`rust-std`). Finally, we implement our safe IPC ideas in the RedLeaf operating system. RedLeaf

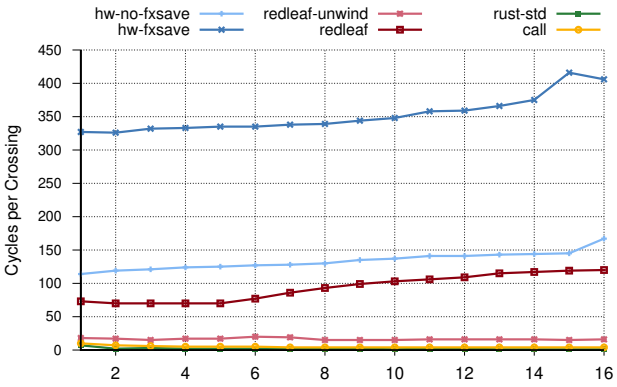

Figure 1. Overhead of Safe and Unsafe IPC

supports fault isolation through a combination of heap isolation and cross-subsystem invocation proxying which we discussed in Section 2. RedLeaf experiments allow us to evaluate the overhead of fault isolation mechanisms. Specifically, we run two configurations: 1) an original RedLeaf implementation [55] that saves and restores all registers similar to our unsafe IPC (`redleaf`), and 2) our new implementation that relies on our custom unwind library that we implemented for RedLeaf (`redleaf-unwind`).

Our experiments measure IPC overheads on a chain of cross-subsystem invocations (Figure 1). We vary the length from 1 to 16. Each invocation simply invokes the next subsystem in a chain and then returns. In all experiments, we measure the total time to execute ten million iterations. An unsafe IPC implementation needs 111-164 cycles to perform a null cross-subsystem invocation (`hw-no-fxsave`). The overhead is increasing as the invocation chain is growing. As the chain grows, saving and restoring general registers touches different pages that hold stacks in each subsystem. The execution becomes memory-bound due to higher pressure on the L1 cache and data TLB (we collect microarchitectural metrics with Intel VTune). Saving and restoring general registers takes 35-71 cycles. The atomic exchange operation which is needed to de-queue a stack in the callee domain takes 28-59 cycles. The atomic operation is the major contributor to the stack switching, without it picking a stack takes only 10 cycles. Saving and restoring extended registers introduces an overhead of additional 216-242 cycles at the total cost of 327-406 cycles for a cross-subsystem invocation (`hw-fxsave`). Zeroing all general registers introduces an overhead of only 3 cycles. With saving and restoring extended registers, the performance impact of the invocation chain is even more profound—the execution becomes memory-bound. Moreover, the need to save extended registers creates enough pressure that `fxrstor` instruction experiences L3 latency in 71% of cases.

The safety guarantees of Rust allow us to perform cross-subsystem invocations with an overhead of a function call, 1-7 cycles (`rust-std`). As the execution continues on the same

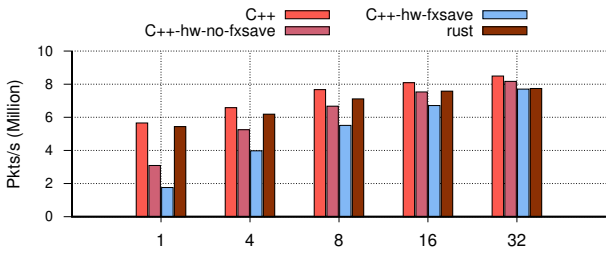

Figure 2. Isolation overheads on varying batch sizes

stack, Rust avoids L1, L3, and data-TLB bottlenecks by staying on the same continuous stack page. Our unwind-based RedLeaf IPC approaches the cost of a function call with 16-18 cycles per domain crossing. To ensure safety and fault isolation, in RedLeaf the execution crosses through a proxy that checks if the callee subsystem is alive and moves the ownership of one `RRef<T>` argument that we pass in this test. The use of unwind mechanism is important. Without unwind, an original version of RedLeaf IPC that creates a continuation takes 73-120 cycles (`redleaf`). Note, that RedLeaf disables the use of extended registers, hence they are not saved. It is still faster than an unsafe IPC as it can continue on the same stack.

In general, we observe that a safe, unwind-based invocation approach the performance of a non-isolated unsafe system.

3.2 Application Benchmarks

To understand the impact of IPC performance in real-world applications, we implement a network function virtualization framework similar to Netbricks [57]. Today, a wide range of *Network Functions* (NFs) handle the most complex network tasks such as intrusion detection, packet filtering, load balancing, etc. NFs are typically deployed as a part of a *service chain* that together processes a stream of packets.

In a modern network, NFs are often built as independent software by third-party vendors and have a set of unique requirements centered around performance, isolation, and reliability. NFs often have conflicting reliability and security goals and require isolation [49, 51, 65, 73, 75]. Isolation of NFs remains a challenging problem due to stringent performance requirements of packet processing applications [1, 37, 40, 51, 59, 62]. Traditional mechanisms that can enforce isolation boundaries — hardware primitives, software fault isolation (SFI), and language safety — impose overheads that are too high for systems that execute at line rate.

To understand the overheads of isolation, we implement the same network functions in C++ and Rust. Both implementations use the DPDK network processing framework [16] to provide low-overhead access to the network interface. Both the C++ and Rust versions operate on a batch of packets (we form the batch using the C DPDK functions which are a trusted part of the system, and hence require no isolation). Then we either call the C++ version of each network function (no isolation is provided) or enter the Rust environment that

	TTL	NAT	ACL	Maglev
	C++/Rust			
Instructions	120/171	235/318	355/351	267/302
Cycles	57/70	149/139	110/142	197/216
Branches	13/22	25/33	44/37	20/33
Branch mispr.	0.04/0.06	0.04/0.05	0.12/0.06	0.06/0.09

Table 1. Microarchitectural comparison of C++ vs Rust

enforces isolation across individual functions of the network chain through an FFI call.

We implement four network functions: (1) **TTL** which decrements the time-to-live field in a packet's IPv4 header, (2) **NAT** which rewrites the source IP and port of a packet according to a mapping, (3) **ACL Firewall** which allows or drops a packet based on a list of pre-defined rules, and (4) **Maglev** which is a load balancer developed by Google to evenly distribute incoming client flows among a set of backend servers [19]. For each new flow, Maglev selects one of the available backends by performing a lookup in a hash table, the size of which is proportional to the number of backend servers (65,537 in our experiments). Consistent hashing allows even distribution of flows across all servers. Maglev then records the chosen backend in a hash table, a *flow tracking table*, that is used to redirect packets from the same flow to the same backend server. The size of the flow tracking table is proportional to the number of flows (we choose 1 M flows for our experiments). Processing a packet requires a lookup in the flow tracking table if it is an existing flow, or a lookup of a backend server and an insertion into the flow tracking table to record the new flow.

3.2.1 Overheads of Language Safety We first analyze the performance impact of using a safe language—after all if safety on its own introduces an overhead that is higher than hardware isolation in an unsafe language using the safety of Rust for isolation does not make sense. We compare performance and several microarchitectural characteristics for the C++ and Rust implementations (Table 1). Specifically, we collect the number of instructions generated by the compiler and the number of cycles required to execute each network function.

In general, for simple network functions like TTL, NAT, and ACL, the Rust and C++ code have similar characteristics, i.e., the Rust code stays within 13-35% of the number of generated CPU instructions for all but the trivial TTL function, and within 7-29% of cycles which are required to execute the function (taking fewer cycles than C++ on NAT). In all functions but ACL, Rust uses a higher number of branch instructions to implement bounds checks, and encounters a slightly higher rate of branch mispredictions.

To understand the performance impact of safety on real-world applications, we compare the performance of the network function chain implemented in C++ and Rust on varying batch sizes (Figure 2). In our tests, we send 64-byte packets and measure the performance on several batch sizes ranging from 1 to 32 packets. We use a packet generator based on ixy [22]. The generator generates 64-byte IPv4 UDP packets at line rate and cycles through 2^{20} different source IP addresses to simulate the presence of multiple flows.

Overall, Rust is 4-8% slower. The major difference is in the use of high-level abstractions which might differ between two languages. For example, Rust relies on the notion of *interior mutability* to break strict ownership rules through a collection of trusted, standard types, e.g., mutexes (`Mutex<T>`), reference-counted pointers (`Rc<T>` and `Arc<T>`), etc., that enforce ownership at run-time. Naturally, run-time checks, and specifically additional pointer dereferences which create a higher cache pressure might negatively affect performance. Similar, high-level language abstractions, like option (`Option<T>`), types might add additional bytes to the data structure they wrap and hence break cache-line alignment [55].

3.2.2 Overheads of Isolation To understand the performance impact of various isolation mechanisms on real-world applications, we isolate network functions in C++ and Rust (Figure 2). We use Rust to enforce the confidentiality and integrity of each network function (`rust`). This is a default guarantee provided by Rust through its safety—each network function can access the state of the program that is reachable through public variables and fields (a similar isolation scheme was implemented by Netbricks [57]). We compare the Rust implementation against the C++ version that relies on hardware-based isolation. To understand the impact of saving and restoring extended registers, we evaluate two configurations: one that uses extended registers and hence has to save them as part of the IPC (`C++-hw-fxsave`) and one that disables the use of extended registers (`C++-hw-no-fxsave`). Our goal is to evaluate whether the use of extended registers can outweigh the cost of saving and restoring them on cross-subsystem invocations.

On small batch sizes, the cost of hardware-based IPC isolation impacts the performance of the network function chain. Without extended registers, an isolated C++ chain achieves only 54% performance of non-isolated code (`C++-hw-no-fxsave`) on a batch of one. Saving and restoring extended registers adds significant overhead, allowing the configuration that uses them to achieve only 31% performance of non-isolated code. The overheads of hardware IPC become amortized on larger batch sizes, allowing both SIMD and non-SIMD versions to match performance of Rust. Overall, while extended registers provide tremendous optimization opportunities, in simple network functions the performance of SIMD and non-SIMD code is nearly identical (we measure it to be within

1%). Naturally, with the current cost of saving and restoring extended registers, their benefit can be realized only in carefully optimized vectorized code.

4 Conclusions

After decades of relatively slow adoption, we finally see a renewed interest in hardware isolation mechanisms. Fortunately, this interest coincides with rapid progress in the domain of practical language safety designed to support the development of low-level systems code and hence provide an alternative way to implement isolation. We study the overheads of hardware isolation in an ideal scenario—the address space switch takes zero cycles—and compare the performance of hardware mechanisms with isolation enforced through the safety of Rust. Our analysis shows that even in this ideal scenario the cost of hardware isolation remains high due to the need to save general and extended register state and the requirement to switch stacks. Rust avoids these two overheads implementing isolation with an overhead of a function call. Moreover, we observe that on realistic workloads Rust incurs only minor overhead of 4-8% compared to unsafe C++.

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