

# A Stitch in Time: Supporting Android Developers in Writing Secure Code

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## ABSTRACT

Despite security advice in the official documentation and an extensive body of security research about vulnerabilities and exploits, many developers still fail to write secure Android applications. Frequently, Android developers fail to adhere to security best practices, leaving applications vulnerable to a multitude of attacks. We point out the advantage of a low-time-cost tool both to teach better secure coding and to improve app security. Using the FixDroid™ IDE plug-in, we show that professional and hobby app developers can work with and learn from an in-environment tool without it impacting their normal work; and by performing studies with both students and professional developers, we identify key UI requirements and demonstrate that code delivered with such a tool by developers previously inexperienced in security contains significantly less security problems. Perfecting and adding such tools to the Android development environment is an essential step in getting both security and privacy for the next generation of apps.

## KEYWORDS

Usable Security; Support Developers; Android Security; Cryptographic API

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The introduction of Android to the mobile operating system market led to the development of new paradigms and open standards on mobile systems. Today, Google's operating system is among the most used mobile operating systems with the largest installed base of any operating system. A major contributor to this success is the Google Play market with its free and paid apps for any and all circumstances, from ordering food to playing card games. The market currently allows Android users to install over 2.9 million apps from third-party developers and, when installed, run the apps on their mobile system. The benefits of a large Android app environment

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thus come with a number of security and privacy related risks for a user, especially due to errors by app developers. Therefore, it is especially important to secure third-party apps, by encouraging and enabling third-party developers to write secure code<sup>1</sup>.

Many available mobile apps have poorly implemented privacy and security mechanisms, possibly resulting from developers who are inexperienced, distracted, or overwhelmed [2]. Risk-factors leading to insecure code include general inexperience of developers, a sole focus on code functionality while ignoring security implications, and careless adopting of code parts from unverified online information sources [2]. Even worse, some developers just copy and paste code they find when searching for a solution to their security related issues [22]. Even in the absence of these security-neglecting actions by developers, benign failure to write privacy preserving or secure code can lead to applications that leave user data vulnerable to leaks and attacks. Developers have been found to risk users' privacy and security by requesting more permissions than actually needed [30, 31], by not using TLS [12, 13], by failing to use cryptographic APIs correctly [9], by using dangerous options for Inter-Component Communication [6], and by failing to store sensitive information in private areas [11].

Although the Android environment provides users with a number of tools and policies to counter security problems and manage privacy risks, the issues above prove that these are not sufficient to prevent insecure Android apps. We propose that supporting App developers in a developer-friendly and compelling manner in making choices will result in improved security and privacy for the app users. Teaching a developer about secure coding practices will not only help the developer, but will also result in increased security and privacy for every user that runs apps by that developer.

To support Android developers in writing secure code, we developed the FixDroid tool. As plugin for the officially supported Integrated Development Environment (IDE) of Android, Android Studio, FixDroid highlights security and privacy related code problems, provides an explanation to developers, and suggests 'quick fix' options. Similar to a spellchecker in a modern word-processor, FixDroid highlights code snippets that impact the security or privacy of the app. FixDroid builds upon the concept of Android Lint, a tool included in the official Android Software Development Kit (SDK), but avoids certain limitations and improves the support for developers.

<sup>1</sup>Throughout this paper we use 'security' to refer to both security and privacy in apps.

To evaluate the usability and acceptance of a FixDroid prototype, we performed a pilot study with 9 developers. With knowledge from this pilot study, we improved FixDroid and performed a remote user study with Android developers and students (n=39) to evaluate the security benefits of FixDroid.

The study proved the effectiveness of this approach by reducing the number of security errors in resulting code. It also validated the approach of using remote IDE telemetrics as a means for evaluating developer behaviour and showed the importance of having very clear visible indicators for security errors.

The main contributions of this work are:

- Proving the effectiveness of an interactive IDE-based security review tool in improving the security and privacy aspects of code written by third party developers,
- Identifying new UI requirements for such a tool based on feedback from developers,
- Delivering evaluations of the effectiveness of such a tool with both experienced professional developers and less experienced student developers, and
- Validating the use of telemetry in an IDE to determine programmer behavior.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 discusses related work; Section 3 gives an overview of Android app development and the Android Lint tool; Section 4 describes the functionality and design of FixDroid; Section 5 describes the initial pilot study and its conclusions; Section 6 describes the design and implementation of the evaluation studies we carried out; and Section 7 describes the findings from the main study. Finally, Section 8 discusses limitations; Section 9 discusses possible future work; and Section 10 provides a conclusion.

## 2 RELATED WORK

We found related work in two key areas: investigations of security issues in Android development, and studies of tools that support developers in writing code.

### 2.1 Security Issues in Android Development

Several research teams have used analysis tools to investigate Android app security. With CryptoLint, a lightweight static analysis tool, Egele et al. [9] showed that 88% of Android applications using cryptographic APIs include at least one mistake. Balebako et al. [3] found that developers can make these mistakes due to lack of security knowledge; Georgiev et al. [15] also identified bad API implementations as a cause. Fahl et al. [12] implemented MalloDroid, a static code analysis tool that detects potential vulnerabilities against SSL Man-In-The-Middle (MITM) attacks in Android and iOS applications, and found that many developers accept insecure practices (such as SSL certificate validation that accepts all certificates) to achieve functional code.

Poepplau et al. [29] investigated dynamic code loading in Android applications, using a static code analysis tool. Their results revealed that many applications load additional code in insecure ways.

The integration of web content into mobile apps also exposes Android applications to multiple types of attacks [26, 27]. Wang et al. [40] studied the cross origin risks inherent in mobile applications and found that lack of origin-based protection enables many types

of cross-origin attacks. Luo et al. [24] also demonstrated different attacks on benign Android and iOS applications that misuse webview customization.

Felt et al. [30] investigated app permissions, and identified several reasons why developers tend to request more permissions than their apps actually need, including insufficient API documentation, confusing permission names, copy and paste code snippets, and testing artifacts. In another investigation concerning ‘permission re-delegation’, Felt et al. [31] concluded that not all developers are security experts and they are not motivated enough to prevent permission re-delegation because the consequences do not affect their applications directly.

Acar et al. [2] examined the impact of the information sources used by Android developers on their security related decisions, and found that developers often use informal sources such as Stack-Overflow, resulting in functional code but often also vulnerabilities in their apps.

### 2.2 Tools that Support Developers

Kim et al. [22] ethnographically studied copy and paste (C&P) programming practices in object oriented programming languages by observing programmers using an instrumented Eclipse IDE, and proposed a set of tools to reduce software maintenance problems incurred by C&P and support the intents of common C&P situations.

Several research teams have developed tools that support secure coding, typically focusing on finding application vulnerabilities after the program has been written. This results in these tools finding vulnerabilities at the end of the development cycle [23, 35]. Furthermore, though valuable, these tools all have one thing in common: developers need to have certain levels of security expertise to use them. Chin et al. [8] proposed platform-level, API-level, and design-level solutions to help developers and platform designers build secure applications and systems. They also developed ComDroid [7] to detect and warn developers of exploitable inter-application communication errors. However, ComDroid works only on compiled code and can thus not help developers while they are writing source code. Jovanovic et al. developed Pixy to help developers avoid cross-site scripting vulnerabilities in PHP scripts [20]. Pixy uses flow-sensitive, inter-procedural and context-sensitive data flow analysis to discover vulnerable points in a web application, but provides no IDE-based feedback to developers. Recently, Tabassum et al. conducted a study comparing the effect of secure programming tool support (ESIDE) versus teaching assistants [25]. The results showed that ESIDE provided more insights to students about the security flaws. Tyler et al. [37] examined how developers understand the support of an interactive static analysis tool using a plugin for Eclipse that helps web developers detect and mitigate security vulnerabilities as they write code.

None of this work, however, has investigated providing feedback on code security to Android developers as they write their code. This paper aims to fill this gap.

## 3 ANDROID APPLICATION DEVELOPMENT

The mobile operating system Android includes the Google Play market with access to over 2.7 million user-developed apps. In the

early days of Android app development, developers either relied on the Eclipse IDE with the Android Development Tools (ADT) plugin or the NetBeans IDE with plugin for writing apps. In December 2014 Google released the Android Studio IDE based on JetBrains' IntelliJ IDEA, which functions together with the SDK as officially supported Android IDE. Features of Android Studio include a Gradle-based build system, and an Android Device emulator for testing apps.

### 3.1 Android Lint Tool

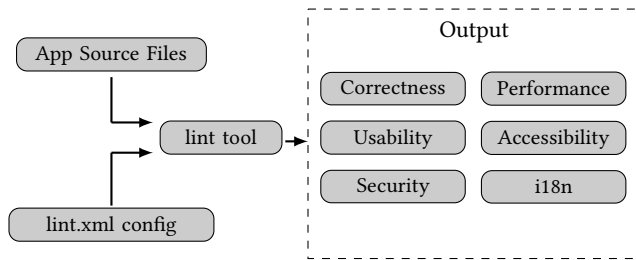


Figure 1: Code scanning work flow with Lint tool

In addition to functional checks, the Android SDK includes the Android Lint code scanning tool to detect problems with the structural quality of code. The lint tool takes a configuration file and the source files of an app, performs static code analysis, and highlights over 200 problems<sup>2</sup> in the categories of correctness, security, performance, usability, accessibility, and internationalization, (cf. Figure 1). Examples of the problems lint highlights include missing permissions for requested APIs, using a mock location provider in production, and initializing a random number generator with a fixed seed.

### 3.2 Lint Shortcomings

Though Lint is a very useful tool that helps developers to improve code quality in general and some aspects of software security in particular, its current implementation does not support the app developer optimally. The following sections identify a couple of drawbacks that limit its effectiveness, and suggest actionable changes for each to make Lint security more effective.

```
Cipher cipher = Cipher.getInstance("AES");
```

Figure 2: A vague highlighted code.

3.2.1 *Limited User Interface.* Lint security uses ‘vague highlighting’ for detected security issues (e.g. ECB mode for cryptography) - cf. Figure 2. This way of highlighting insecure code snippets has two drawbacks:

- Lint uses the same highlighting for all kinds of warnings, i.e. non-security related bad code smells are highlighted in the same way as security related bad code smells.

<sup>2</sup><https://sites.google.com/a/android.com/tools/tips/lint-checks>

- Using the same highlighting for all sorts of coding problems may lead to habituation and even to overlooking the highlighting entirely.

Proposed Action:

To attract the developer’s attention, the user interface should consider insights from previous usable security and privacy research [10, 32, 34].

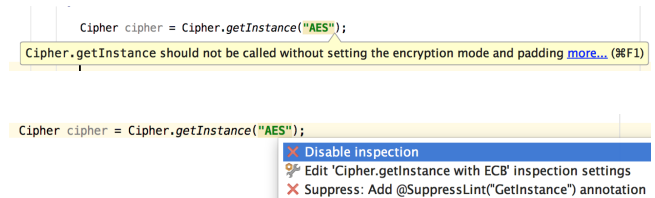


Figure 3: Lint does not provide help in term of quick-fixes for security bad practices .

3.2.2 *No Way Out.* While Lint highlights security problems and even provides textual information in the form of tool tips (cf. Figure 3), it does not guide developers through the process of turning insecure code into secure code. Although this is not possible in all cases (in particular in cases that spread insecurities across many different methods, classes and packages), in many cases developers could be instructed to apply secure coding practices. Examples might be not using an empty TrustManager implementation, or replacing an insecure mode of operation such as ECB for symmetric cryptography.

Proposed Action:

Provide easy-to-use code snippets to turn insecure code into secure code in as many cases as possible [14].

3.2.3 *Limited Data Flow Analysis.* Lint has a lightweight data flow analysis to detect programming issues [19, 36]. It is able to detect obvious security issues such as using ECB for symmetric encryption or a HostNameVerifier that returns true (cf. Figure 4).

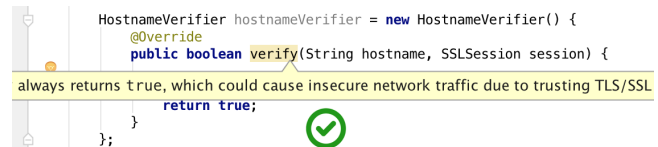


Figure 4: Android Lint is able to detect an insecure HostNameVerifier that returns true.


However, due to the lack of comprehensive data flow analysis, Lint does not detect more complex instances of the above problem (cf. Figure 5).

```

final boolean isTesting = true;

HostnameVerifier hostnameVerifier = new HostnameVerifier() {
    @Override
    public boolean verify(String hostname, SSLSession session) {
        return isTesting;
    }
};

```



**Figure 5: Android Lint fails to detect a simple insecure Host-NameVerifier.**

While we are aware that comprehensive data flow analysis is an ongoing branch of research in the field of static code analysis [18, 28], we feel that covering some more complex cases is crucial to provide a good user experience, since it confuses users to detect one instance of a problem but not another, more complex one.

Proposed Action:  
Improve data flow analysis to cover more complex cases

## 4 FIXDROID

Given these limitations in Android Lint, we believe the tool has only limited impact in helping developers to improve app security. We hypothesized that an enhanced version might achieve better security results. To test this hypothesis, we implemented a further plug-in for Android Studio, tailored towards teaching developers about app security. We call this tool ‘FixDroid’.

FixDroid addresses the Lint tool’s limitations, and adds functionality to learn about developer behavior, while supporting developers in making security related decisions.

FixDroid aims to give its users unobtrusive feedback about the privacy and security impact of the code, as they write it. FixDroid scans a developers’ code for ‘pitfalls’: constructs with less-than-ideal privacy and security. Additionally, FixDroid detects whenever a developer pastes a code snippet and attempts to match it against an online database of known insecure code snippets (from StackOverflow). FixDroid is available as an IntelliJ IDEA plugin for Android Studio. It had had more than 500 downloads by August 2017<sup>3</sup>.

### 4.1 Addressed Pitfalls

FixDroid currently covers 13 security pitfalls taken from the Android Official documentation and from the existing research described in Section 2. It indicates these problems on the appropriate lines of code, using a ‘security indicator’ to catch developers’ attention. For some of those pitfalls, FixDroid offers quick-fixes; when a quick-fix is not available, FixDroid provide a warning message that describes the pitfall. The list of addressed security pitfalls is in Table 1.

### 4.2 Learning Support

FixDroid ships with a sample ‘study project’ and instructions to help developers learn how to use it. The sample project challenges a developer to avoid many of the possible pitfalls, specifically those related to secure network connections, SQL injection, and encryption.

<sup>3</sup><https://plugins.jetbrains.com/plugin/9497-fixdroid>

## 4.3 Research Support

Fixdroid also includes three features to support research, as follows.

**4.3.1 Uploading Source Code.** When participants complete a security task in the study project, FixDroid sends their completed implementation to our server.

**4.3.2 Telemetry.** FixDroid contains a telemetry feature to quantify its usability and helpfulness, as well as the failures and limitations of FixDroid. Its aim is to gain a better understanding of how developers interact with FixDroid. Specifically, FixDroid’s telemetry feature measures:

- Security bad practice events, including the time, the type of bad practice (pitfall), and whether the code in question was copied/pasted.
- Security good practice events, code that avoids a pitfall, to help measure if participants’ security programming skills improve from using FixDroid.
- Security tooltip events record whether a particular warning message has been read by developers, how long developers spend to read it.
- Quickfix events, indicating whether an offered quickfix was used by developers, when it was used, and whether the developer used the default shortcut of Android Studio or clicked on security indicator.

**4.3.3 Experience Sampling.** In our pilot study we found from the exit survey that some participants could not recall the causes of the issues detected, nor distinguish Fixdroid functionality from existing Android Studio features. So we added functionality to sample programmers’ experience as they interact with different components of FixDroid. This functionality includes:

- Copy & Paste event: When FixDroid detects a pasted insecure code snippet, it asks the programmer for the source of that snippet, preferably as a URL.
- Quick-Fix applied event: When the programmer applies a suggested quick-fix, FixDroid asks how useful they found the quick-fix, on a five point Likert scale.

### 4.4 How FixDroid Works

FixDroid leverages the inspecting mechanism in IntelliJ IDEA<sup>4</sup>. By default, FixDroid analyzes all open files of Java and Xml source code. It highlights all security bad practices as the developer writes code, using both IntelliJ’s default highlighting and more visible ‘security indicators’ on the insecure code’s line numbers. Furthermore, IntelliJ also supports developers running FixDroid inspection in bulk mode where all source files will be inspected: thus the developer can choose to inspect an entire project, or any scope within it.

When the developer moves the mouse over the highlighted code or over the security indicator, the corresponding warning message will be displayed. The developer can enable the available quick-fix by using the default short-cut of Android Studio or by simply clicking on the security indicator (cf. Figure 6).

<sup>4</sup><https://www.jetbrains.com/help/idea/running-inspections.html>

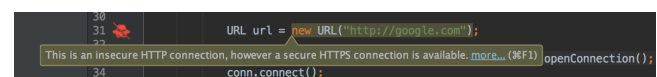
Pitfall	Security Tooltip	Quick-fix
Insecure Cipher.getInstance	You appear to be using Cipher.getInstance with the insecure default ECB Mode. To improve security, a different encryption mode with padding e.g. AES and CBC should be used.	AES/CBC/PKCS5Padding
Non-random Initial Vector for Cipher.init	You appear to use a constant Initial Vector. To secure the encrypted data against hacking attacks, the IV should be randomly generated and passed or stored along with the encrypted data.	
Constant key for encryption	You are using a constant key for encryption. To avoid an extraction the hard-coded key of the hard-coded key by reverse-engineering, a dynamically generated should be used, preferably from a server.	
Less than 1000 iterations for PBE	You are using less than 1000 iterations for PBE. It is recommended to use at least 1000 iterations to increase the difficulty of reversing the hash.	Use 1000 iterations
ECB mode for encryption	You appear to be using the insecure ECB mode for encryption. It is recommended to use a more secure mode like AES/CBC/PKCS5Padding.	AES/CBC/PKCS5Padding
Improper HostNameVerifier	You appear to be using an improper HostNameVerifier. This allows an attacker to impersonate the host. It is recommended to use default HostNameVerifier or, better still, SSL pinning.	
SecureRandom with static seed	You are using a static seed, which allows an attacker to predict the random numbers generated. It is recommended to use the default constructor of SecureRandom.	Remove static seed
HTTP over HTTPS	You are using an insecure HTTP connection. An attacker may intercept and view all the traffic, or replace the server completely. It is recommended to use HTTPS.	HTTPS upgrade
WebView HTTP over HTTPS	You are using an insecure HTTP connection. An attacker may intercept and view all the traffic, or replace the server completely. It is recommended to use HTTPS.	HTTPS upgrade
WebView Loading local HTML file	You are loading HTML content directly from the file system. A virus or rogue app running on the device might replace this with other code. It is recommended to load JavaScript only from secure areas.	
Custom certificate	This is a connection to a server with a self-signed/untrusted certificate. If you believe this server should be trusted, it is recommended to use SSL pinning.	SSL pinning
Loading code from public places	You are loading code from the publicly accessible location. This code can be infected from contact with a virus or rogue app running on the device. It is recommended to load code only from secure sources.	
SQL Injection	You are using a query that is vulnerable to SQL injection. An attacker can enter text that is interpreted as SQL commands, allowing access to the whole database. It is recommended to use a parameterized query.	Place-holder string

**Table 1: Security tooltips and corresponding quick-fixes displayed by FixDroid.**

#### 4.5 Example of Use

Figures 6 through 8 show an Insecure Network Connection example. Here FixDroid observes that developers are writing code to connect to a given URL with the HTTP protocol – which is insecure. FixDroid finds a quick-fix using the same URL but replacing HTTP by HTTPS. Given this option is available, developers are informed by highlighting the insecure code and marking the corresponding code lines as insecure with a security warning icon. When developers move their mouse over the highlighted code or the warning icon, a corresponding message is shown, telling them what the problem is and how to resolve it. Developers can fix the insecure code by

clicking on the warning icon or by using the built-in shortcut of Android Studio (cf. Figure 7). When a quick-fix is applied (cf. Figure 8), the previous warning message and security indicator disappear.



**Figure 6: FixDroid detects an insecure code snippet.**

```

30
31 URL url = new URL("http://google.com");
32
33 HttpURLConnection conn = (Http
34 conn.connect());

```

Figure 7: FixDroid suggests a quick fix.

```

30
31 URL url = new URL("https://google.com");
32
33 HttpURLConnection conn = (HttpURLConnection)url.openConnection();
34 conn.connect();

```

Figure 8: HTTPS Upgrade quick-fix has been applied.

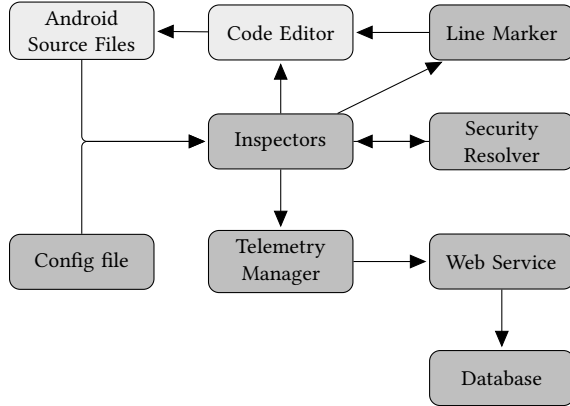


Figure 9: FixDroid’s Architecture

#### 4.6 FixDroid Implementation

The different components of FixDroid are illustrated in Figure 9. Inspectors are the center components that watch developer’s code. Whenever the developer finishes writing a line of code, a method or a class implementation, the appropriate Inspector invokes Security Resolver to check if that given code snippet is secure or not. If the code snippet is insecure, the Inspector forwards the information to Telemetry Manager. At the same time the Inspector also informs developers via Code Editor by highlighting the insecure code snippet as well as marking the insecure code with a security indicator.

When the developer invokes a quick-fix, this invokes Line Marker to make the code change.

Web Service supports FixDroid’s communication with our back-end database. Config File contains the mapping of which Inspector is responsible for which security pitfall.

#### 4.7 Static code analysis

FixDroid leverages the IntelliJ IDEA static analysis techniques to performs static code analysis at method, class and project levels. Hence, FixDroid can statistically resolve variables that are computed from different code locations. This eliminates mistakes similar to the example of HostNameVerifier (c.f Section 3.2.3).

### 5 PILOT STUDY

In the developer review sections and the pilot study, we have the same 3 programming tasks: network connection, SQL query, and data encryption. They will be described in details in section 6.2

### 5.1 Initial User Interface Evaluation

First, we conducted three developer review sessions to gain a first insight into how developers might use FixDroid in real world situations. The reviews were conducted with three Android developers within the lead author’s organization, CISPA. These three developers were asked to solve three programming tasks with FixDroid installed on their Android Studio. To closely observe the developers’ interaction with FixDroid, a researcher sat beside them while they were solving the tasks. Developers expressed their feelings and expectations during the study.

From the reviews, we observed:

- All the observations of programmer behavior could be automated by the tool, so we did not need to invite future participants into our lab to watch them solve programming tasks. This could help avoid the biases that lab studies often face [16, 17].
- Highlighting insecure code is not enough. None of the three developers noticed the highlighted code.

Therefore as a next step we redesigned the field study to be conducted automatically and remotely. We invited later participants to join in our study online, by installing FixDroid over the web. We added functionality to gather and observe developers’ interaction and send anonymous details to FixDroid’s server. We also added an additional security indicator (cf. Figure 6 and 7) to inform developers of insecure practices.

### 5.2 Remote Pilot Study

We conducted a second pilot study with 9 participants, recruited from our industry contacts. All were experienced professional developers; Table 2 shows the participant demographics.

Age		
Mean = 26.11	Median = 26	Standard Deviation = 1.36
Professional Android Experience		
Yes = 5	No = 4	

Table 2: Pilot study participant demographics.

All participants reported that they noticed the security indicator from FixDroid while only 3 participants noticed the highlighted code. This indicates the effectiveness of the security indicator in informing developers about their insecure code snippet.

In this study, 6 out of 9 participants used quick-fixes provided by FixDroid. At this time FixDroid only provided participants with quick-fixes for the SQLite and Connection tasks; only one participant managed a secure solution for the Encryption task. That 8 out of 9 participants produced insecure code for the Encryption task although all of them had read FixDroid’s warning messages, suggests that the cryptographic APIs in Android are particularly difficult for developers to use, even when they are aware of the security implications of their code. With that in mind, we decided to include a quick-fix for the Encryption task in our final study.



## 6 USER STUDY

### 6.1 Study Design

For our main study, we wanted to evaluate the effectiveness of the FixDroid approach with professional Android developers. We therefore recruited Android developers who submitted apps to the Google Play store.

Our hypothesis H1 was that developers using FixDroid would deliver more secure Android code; the corresponding null hypothesis H0 that they would not. We therefore divided participants into two groups: developers in one group had all the functionality of FixDroid (FixDroid enabled); developers in the other did not have FixDroid fully enabled (no warning messages or quick-fixes). Both groups had the Lint tool enabled. To balance the group sizes the FixDroid server assigned participants based on the number of valid participants so far received in each group.

Each participant carried out the ‘study project’. Our analysis only considers participants who completed writing code for at least 1 code snippet and filled out our exit survey.

### 6.2 Study Tasks

In the ‘study project’, participants were provided a skeleton Android application and asked to solve three different security related programming tasks. Each participant received the same three programming tasks, although the task ordering was randomized. For each task, a corresponding unit test was provided that participants could run to check if their solution is functional. Note that the test cases do not check if the solution is secure.

The following sections describe the three tasks. While these do not encompass the entire space of security relevant problems encountered by Android developers, previous studies [1, 2] have found that even simple problems similar or identical to those used in the study lead to problems in production code.

**Network Connection.** This provides a code snippet to be completed to establish a connection to a server. Participants were given the domain and query path of the URL, then requested to add a protocol to make this URL valid and establish the connection and get a return code status (i.e 200, 400 or 500). The goal of this task was to check if participants used a secure connection (HTTPS) to connect to the given host. The host supported both HTTP and HTTPS protocols.

A corresponding test case was provided, which passes when the method connect returns the value of 200.

**Data Encryption.** In this task, participants were asked to encrypt a given plain-text. Participants were expected to encrypt a string and return an array of bytes. The goal of this task is to see how knowledgeable developers are about cryptographic APIs.

A corresponding test case was provided, which passes when the returned array of encryption method is not null and has a length greater than 16.

**SQLite Query.** In this task, participants were asked to build a SQL query to retrieve the age of a given user name. In the skeleton app, we have already created a SQLite database with a predefined table named "users". Table "users" has 4 columns: id, name, age,

password. The goal of this task is to see if participants are aware of SQL injection attacks.

A corresponding test case was provided, which passes when this test case returns the correct age of a predefined user which has been inserted into the attached SQLite database.

### 6.3 Participant Journey

After each participant finished installing FixDroid and its dependencies<sup>5</sup>, the installer requested a restart of their Android Studio to commission the newly installed plugin (FixDroid). FixDroid then offered the participant to join our Android Research Study with a reminder that all of the listed dependencies must be installed in advance.

If the participant decided to join our study, FixDroid then provided instructions on how to navigate between tasks, test cases and how to reset a solution back to the original version of the code; then invited them to click start to get the first task. Every time the participant built the Android application, the solution was sent to FixDroid’s web service for later analysis.

Since the second group did not have FixDroid enabled for the study, when a participant in this group had filled in our exit survey, FixDroid then enabled its full functionality. It also opened a file containing example insecure code, allowing the participant to see how the full-functionality FixDroid worked by examining the warning message or applying the provided quick-fix. Thus each participant in the second group received the benefit of the FixDroid tool for later use without a biasing effect on our study results.

### 6.4 Exit Survey

While a participant was still completing the tasks, FixDroid showed an "Open Survey" button, encouraging participation in our the survey. When a participant had written code that passed all of the three test cases, FixDroid prompted explicitly for participation in the survey. FixDroid also asked for survey participation when a participant closed or quit Android Studio without completing all the tasks.

For the group with FixDroid enabled the survey included questions about the participant’s interaction with FixDroid together with demographic questions. For the group without FixDroid, the survey asked only demographic questions. Appendix Section A has details of the questions.

We considered including System Usability Scale (SUS) questions [4] in our exit survey, but decided not for the following reasons:

- FixDroid is not a standalone system.
- Participants would be likely to think of the study project as FixDroid’s functionality and rate that, which wouldn’t be a useful measure.

### 6.5 Evaluating Participant Solutions

We invoked each sample of code submitted by our participants, built into a suitable framework. For each task, we also manually evaluated their security and functional correctness, creating a score to reflect each outcome based on the properties of each task. Two researchers were assigned to score the participants’ solutions, with

<sup>5</sup>SDK Platform Android 7, Android SDK build-tools

a third coder providing a casting vote in cases of disagreement. The scores were assigned as follows:

*Functionality.* For each programming task, a participant received score 1 for their functionality if the code passed the test, otherwise 0 is given.

*Security.* Only functional solutions received a security score. Depending on the task, we evaluated different security considerations, coding each as secure (1) or not (0) as follows.

## 6.6 Security Evaluation

For the Connection task, if a participant used https protocol for their connection, their solution was considered secure; http was considered insecure.

```
String query = "select age from users where name = ?";
Cursor cursor = database.rawQuery(query, new
// or
Cursor cursor2 = database.query("users", new String [] { "age
", "name=?", new String [] { userName }, null, null, null
);
```

**Listing 1: Parameterized query string**

For the SQLite task, if a participant used question mark ? as string placeholder and put userName as parameter of their rawQuery method call; or if they used the query method specifying the column’s name, table’s name, and arguments as parameters, the solutions was considered secure. See Listing 1, for example. However, if a participant concatenated the variable userName to their query string, the solutions was coded as insecure.

For the Encryption task, we captured how different parameters affect a solution’s security as described in Table 3; that table only lists options that were found in one or more participants’ solutions.

Parameter	Secure	Insecure
Cipher/Mode	AES/CBC [39] AES/GCM [33] AES/CFB[33]	DES, AES/ECB [9] Blowfish [38]
Initialization Vector provider generated		static [9] bad derivation[9]
Key	provider generated	static [9] bad derivation [9]
Password Based Encryption	>=1k iterations [21] >=64-bit salt [21] non-static salt [21]	< 1k iteration [21] < 64-bit salt[21] static salt [9]

**Table 3: Encryption security parameters**

## 6.7 Recruitment

To maintain the validity of our study, we wanted only to recruit experienced Android developers. Therefore, we extracted developers’ emails from the Google Play Store, since any such developer will have completed at least one working app. We sent emails in batches, asking Google Play developers to participate in a study on how to support Android developers in writing code. We did not mention security in the recruitment email. However, this approach

did not scale well since participants wanted to know what FixDroid does before installing it as an Android Studio plugin. We received a number of emails asking for this information. We also provided participants the option to stop receiving invitation emails from us.

To encourage more participants, we added more details to our later emails, specifying that FixDroid helps developers write more secure code with possible quick-fixes. After this change we had a higher response rate. In all, we sent invitation emails to 210,854 developers and got 16 participants who volunteered to participate in our study and finished both writing code and filling in our exit survey.

We also recruited students to join in our study. As compensation they received 25 Euros either in cash or as an Amazon voucher. We sent invitation emails to five universities in Germany.

Our email linked to the FixDroid plugin in the Android Studio plugins repository, allowing participants to download FixDroid directly from their Android Studio.

To verify students’ Android programming experience we gave them a set of 5 Android programming related questions to answer. We only invited students who answered at least 3 questions correctly. 65 students participated in our pre-study quiz; 59 were invited. We stopped recruiting when we had 24 students, due to budget constraints.

## 6.8 Ethical Concerns

All the telemetry data was gathered pseudonymously, with personally identifiable information removed before sending it to the server. All data was sent securely to FixDroid’s web service using HTTPS. Our study was approved by our institution’s ethics review board.

We have concerns about researchers sending emails to large numbers of developers, and are working with StackOverflow to deliver an opt-in list for developers interested in working with academic researchers.

## 7 STUDY RESULTS

### 7.1 Participants

In total, 409 participants downloaded FixDroid. Table 4 shows how many from each group completed the exit survey. This includes some participants who did not write any code.

Mode	Started	Completed
Full functionality	45	22
Only telemetry	70	35

**Table 4: Number of participants who started and completed surveys**

Table 5 shows how many completed 1, 2, or 3 tasks, and how many dropped out before completing any tasks. This includes all participants, including those who didn’t complete a task or the survey.



Mode	0 Task	1 Task	2 Tasks	3 Tasks
Full functionality	33	9	3	19
Only telemetry	55	5	3	19

**Table 5: Number of participants who completed tasks**

Our participants in the developers group were aged between 21 and 47 (see Table 7) while participants in students groups were aged between 19 and 30.

Country	Count	Country	Count
Moldova	1	Poland	1
UK	1	Colombia	1
Germany	3	India	3
Vietnam	2	Turkey	1
Czech Republic	1	Greece	1
Kenya	1		

**Table 6: Country of origin of developers**

All the students come from Germany; the developers included participants from nearly all over the world (Table 6).

	Full functionality	Only Telemetry
<b>Age</b>		
Mean	25.32	27.45
Median	25.00	25.00
Standard Deviation	4.60	5.88
<b>Information Security Background</b>		
Yes	7	12
No	6	14
<b>Apps Submitted</b>		
Mean	4.89	6.95
Median	3.00	3.00
Standard Deviation	4.42	7.05

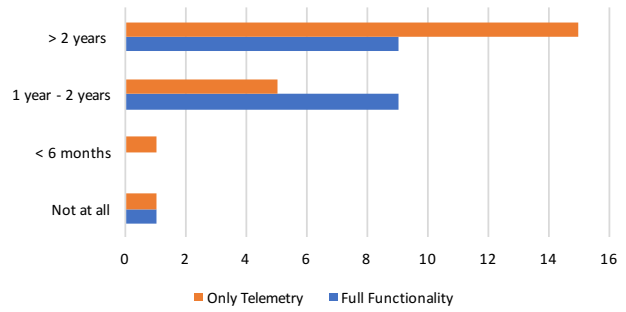
**Table 7: Participant Background**

Almost all participants have been programming in Android for at least 6 months (see Figure 10). The exception was two students who had only taken Android programming related courses.

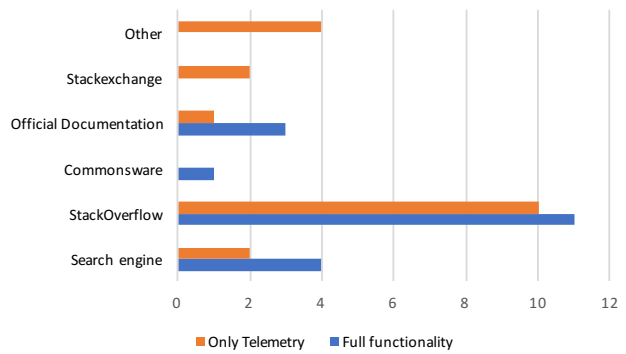
## 7.2 Findings from Participants' Experience

This section explores our findings from the exit survey, telemetry features and experience sampling. This analysis considers only participants who completed both at least one task and the exit survey.

**7.2.1 Sources of Information.** Figure 11 shows participants' descriptions of where they looked for coding support. The results are consistent with Acar et al.'s earlier research [2], suggesting that these developers are typical in their use of development resources.

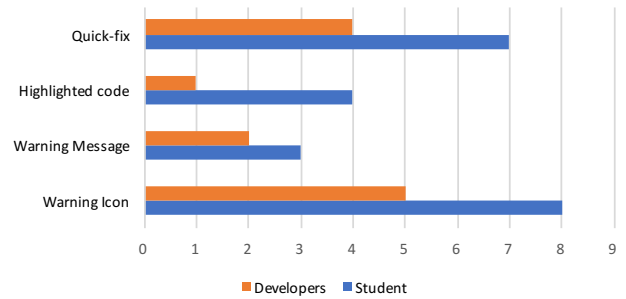


**Figure 10: Android programming experience**



**Figure 11: Where do you usually look for security related coding questions?**

**7.2.2 Perceived use of FixDroid features.** Moving on to consider survey information from the participants using FixDroid, Figure 12 shows which features of FixDroid users believed they used. Consistently the students used more features; and the warning icon and quick-fix were used most. This is consistent with the telemetry recorded by FixDroid (see Section 7.2.4)



**Figure 12: FixDroid features reported by participants**

**7.2.3 Perceived value of quick fixes.** Every time participants used a quick-fix offered by FixDroid, they were immediately presented with a question asking for the usefulness of the provided quick-fix, using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to

“Strongly Agree”. Figure 13 summarises the responses; a majority of quick-fix users agreed or strongly agreed that their provided quick-fixes were useful.

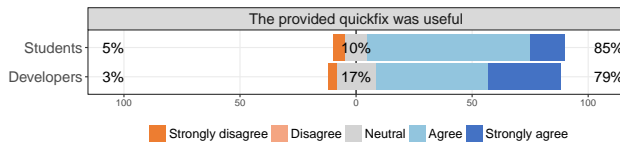


Figure 13: Reported value of each quickfix applied

On the exit survey, nearly two third of the participants (63.15%) in the FixDroid group reported that they used at least one provided quick-fix; they all reported that the provided quick-fix was useful (n=19). Interestingly only half of participants in this group reported having used IDE-provided quick-fixes prior to our study, although quick-fixes are generally available for non-security related issues.

7.2.4 *Actual Use of FixDroid Features.* Figure 14 shows the actual use of FixDroid’s features during each of the tasks, as measured by FixDroid’s telemetry functionality. The Encryption task generated significantly more activities than the other two, suggesting that that this is particularly difficult for developers.

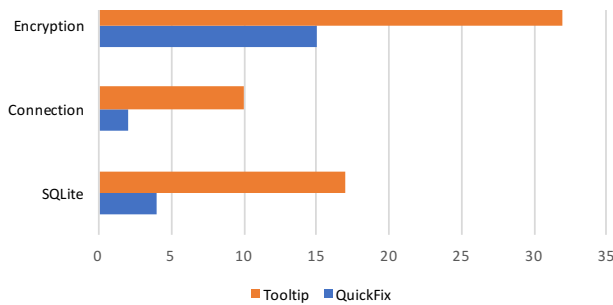


Figure 14: Actual use of FixDroid features

7.2.5 *Use of copy/paste.* Figure 15 shows the developer use of copy/paste during each of the tasks. Again, the Encryption task generated significantly more than the other two, suggesting that it required much more online research on the part of developers. Whenever participants copied and pasted an insecure code snippet to their solution, FixDroid asked them to provide us the URL of the website from which they copied the code. The most common source was StackOverflow; this supports the reported information sources in our exit survey. We manually examined the links, and found that, for encryption related questions, every link contained at least one insecure code snippet.

Other participants reported that they copied code from other projects or from their notepad.

### 7.3 Regression Model

The following sections show the results of applying a regression model to analyze the results in detail. Table 8 shows the factors analyzed. Since we are only interested in binary outcomes (e.g., secure vs. insecure), we used logistic regression. When we considered

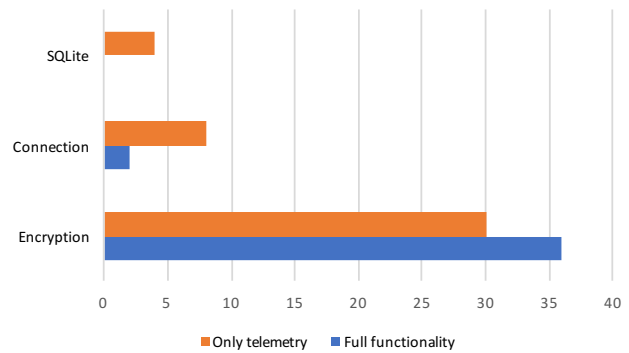


Figure 15: Number of copied and pasted insecure code events

Factor	Description	Baseline
<i>Required factors</i>		
Mode	FixDroid or Default	Only telemetry feature
Task	One of the three tasks described in Section 6.2	Connection
<i>Optional factors</i>		
Group	Developer or student	Developer
Experienced	True if participant has submitted more than 5 apps or has more than 3 years of experience otherwise False. Self-reported.	False
Security background	True or False, self reported	False

Table 8: Factors used in regression analysis

results on a per-task rather than a per-participant basis, we used a mixed model that adds a random intercept to account for multiple tasks from the same participant.

For the regression analysis, we considered a set of candidate models and selected the model with the lowest Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) [5]. The included factors are described in Table 8. We considered candidate models consisting of the required factors *mode* and *task*, the participant random intercept, plus every possible combination of the optional variables.

We report the outcome of our regressions in Table 9. Each row measures the change in the analyzed outcome related to changing from the *baseline* value for a given factor to a different value for that factor (such as changing from not having access to FixDroid functionality to having FixDroid activated). Logistic regressions produce an odds ratio (O.R.) that measures the change in likelihood of the targeted outcome; baseline factors by construction have O.R.=1. In each row, we also give a 95% confidence interval (C.I.) and a p-value indicating statistical significance.

For the regression, we set using normal Android Studio (only with FixDroid telemetry features) as the baseline. In addition, we

used the connection task as the baseline, as this seems like a likely task for developers to encounter in real life and has been done before by Acar et al. [2]. All baseline values are given in Table 8.

### 7.4 Functional Correctness Results

We observed no statistically significant difference in the number of functional solutions between each task, and between groups (cf. Figure 16). Developers and students with FixDroid’s support do not perform significantly better compared to participants with only the telemetry features, in terms of functional correctness.

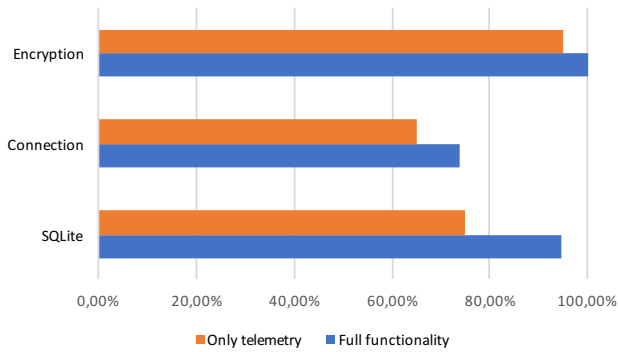


Figure 16: Funtionality results for each task

### 7.5 Security Correctness Results

Figure 17 shows the proportion of developers and students achieving a secure solution in each of the tasks. We were pleased to see a dramatic difference in security success, with more than twice the proportion achieving a secure solution in the Encryption and Connection tasks. Interestingly there was little difference in security success for the SQLite task.

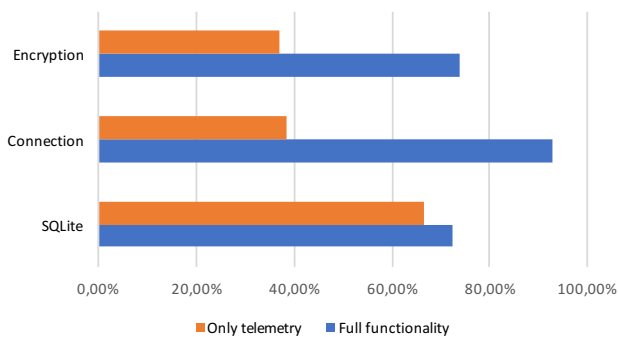


Figure 17: Security results for each task

Table 9 shows the analysis for these figures, considering factors contributing to task security, performed on functionally correct tasks. Statistically significant values are indicated with \*.

Since we used the group of participants with no security quick-fixes or warning messages available as our baseline, our hypothesis

Factor	O.R.	C.I.	p.value
FixDroid	19.55	[2.42, 157.84]	0.005*
Encryption	0.37	[0.13, 1.06]	0.065
SQLite	0.99	[0.34, 2.88]	0.993

Table 9: Mixed logistic regression on factors contributing to task security

H1 (that FixDroid has an impact on security) is represented by the factor ‘FixDroid’ in the analysis. We can therefore reject the null hypothesis, H0, that FixDroid has no impact, with the p value of 0.005.

## 8 LIMITATIONS

We can identify the following limitations to our sampling process. First, since the participants are in effect self-selecting, we have an opt-in bias. There is the possibility that these results won’t extend to the full set of programmers. We also have a relatively small sample set, though we have addressed that using appropriate statistical methods.

As we wanted to have more participants, we had to compensate students to join our study while professional developers were not paid. However, we observed only one significant difference: professional developers were more likely to drop out.

There is an issue with acquiescence bias or the Hawthorne effect, especially in the reported value of quick-fixes in section 7.2.3: participants are more likely to report liking a new system.

As we describe in Section 6.7, we had to briefly mention what FixDroid does in order to recruit more professional developers. This could possibly introduce bias into our study. It is not an easy task to convince developers to install a third party plugin without telling them what it does.

Though we believe it is important, we did not focus on improving data flow analysis except for leveraging the existing features of IntelliJ IDEA previously ignored by Lint (see Section 4.7).

## 9 FUTURE WORK

We have identified several areas for further work:

- FixDroid provides a good platform for the analysis of programmer coding behaviour with regards to security. Clearly there is scope for exercises covering further kinds of defect and using FixDroid to analyse how developers address them.
- Improved data flow analysis will help developers detect more kinds of defect; work on this will improve the usefulness of FixDroid app still more.
- FixDroid continuously measures security good practices and security bad practices. This has the potential to support a future longitudinal study to see if people actually use FixDroid and get better at writing secure code over time.
- Further, and more ambitiously, FixDroid telemetry feedback has the potential to support machine learning to start to identify software security ‘smells’ and provide more sophisticated analysis of developer code.

## 10 CONCLUSION

This paper explored the possibility of supporting Android developers to write secure code. Section 3 showed the limitations of the existing Android Lint tool, and suggests improvements. These improvements motivated the creation of a new IDE plug-in, FixDroid, as described in Section 4.

A series of studies evaluated this approach, as described in Section 6, and analyzed in Section 7. Early studies discovered the importance of a more visible signal of security issues than the existing Lint indicators. The later studies also validated the approach of using telematics in an IDE to determine programmer behavior.

Finally, the studies conclusively proved the effectiveness of such a tool in improving the security of code produced.

These findings suggest that it will significantly improve the security of developed apps if future Android IDEs contain functionality similar to the FixDroid tool, with a clear indication of security errors and offers of security ‘quick-fixes’.

We conclude that, to improve app security, it’s vital that future versions of the Android development environments incorporate similar features.

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## A EXIT SURVEY

### A.1 FixDroid specific questions

- During the study, did you notice any interaction from FixDroid while performing the tasks? If yes:
  - What interaction did you see from FixDroid? Warning messages, Highlighted code, warning icon, quick-fixes, other
- Did the plugin provide you any additional information?

- Did you use any provided quick-fix in our lab study? If yes:
  - Did the inserted code FixDroid work?
  - Do you feel it was helpful?

### A.2 General questions

- What is your age?
- What is your gender?
- Where are you from?
- For how many years have been programming in Android?
- What is your highest degree of education?
- Is programming your primary job? If yes: Is writing Android code part of your primary job?. If no: Was programming part of your job in the last 5 years?
- Do you have information security background?
- How many Android applications you have developed?
- Where do you usually look for security related coding questions? (website)
- Are you familiar with Android Studio (or IntelliJ IDE in general)?

## B EXPERIENCE SAMPLING SURVEY

- How do you think this quick-fix is useful? (Strongly agree; agree; neutral; disagree; strongly disagree)
- It seems like you are copying code from somewhere, could you please tell us the website (the link) you have copied this code from?