



Hardening Linux workstations and servers

First published: November 2013

Last updated: October 2026

Introduction

This publication has been developed to assist organisations in understanding how to harden Linux workstations and servers.

While this publication refers specifically to Linux environments, the guidance presented is equally applicable to all Unix-style environments.

Priority hardening of Linux environments

Application and operating system patching

Patching Linux is easy to achieve when combined with locally hosted repositories and scheduled scripts. Some Linux distributions now provide administrative servers that allow control of workstations and servers from a centralised location in order to approve updates as required. This can enhance the ability of an organisation to efficiently and effectively manage their change management processes and procedures while ensuring timely patching occurs. Linux system administrators should check with their vendor if they are unsure how to best handle application and operating system patching in Linux environments.

Multi-factor authentication

While the choice of where and how to enforce the use of multi-factor authentication is largely independent of the operating system used by users, the support for specific multi-factor solutions may not be. For example, when implementing multi-factor authentication for Linux environments care should be taken to select a vendor that provides Linux drivers and [Pluggable Authentication Modules](#) (if required). Vendors that support Linux environments should also provide guidance on [how to configure their solutions](#) once any pre-requisite drivers and [Pluggable Authentication Modules have been installed](#).

Restricting administrative privileges

Restricting administrative privileges in Linux environments can be achieved by controlling the number of users with administrative privileges, as well as controlling the access of those accounts.

The number of users with administrative privileges on Linux workstations and servers can be determined by auditing the number of users with privileged accounts or the ability to elevate permissions. This can be achieved by listing groups and group memberships of users to check which users belong to each group. The 'sudoers' group, and any other specific admin groups for a given distribution, must be considered when conducting this audit. Additionally, organisations should ensure users do not have a user identifier or group identifier of 0 which would grant root access.

In addition to minimising the number of users with administrative privileges, organisations should ensure they enforce a policy of using the sudo command when administering Linux servers as opposed to logging in locally or remotely with an administrative account. This will not only prevent the use of shared accounts, but also enhance the ability of an organisation to audit administrative access and encourage system administrator accountability.

Application control

Implementing application control within Linux environments can be achieved using the [File Access Policy daemon](#) (fapolicyd). The fapolicyd framework allows Linux system administrators to control which applications are allowed (or denied) execution based on either path, hash, MIME type or if they are trusted (i.e. properly installed by the system package manager and registered in the RPM database). Red Hat's [Security Hardening](#) publication provides advice on [how to configure and manage the use of the fapolicyd framework](#) within Red Hat Enterprise Linux 9.

General hardening of Linux environments

Given the difficulty in implementing application control in Linux environments, the following mitigation strategies can be implemented to assist with reducing the residual risk of the exploitation of Linux workstations and servers. Note, this list is not exhaustive and does not take into account specific use cases or differences between Linux distributions:

- Use unique restricted users for key at-risk services (e.g. Apache software runs under a restricted 'apache' user role).
- Disable unrequired operating system functionality, including disabling unrequired network services.
- Apply additional forms of security policy enforcement such as SELinux or AppArmor.
- Implement appropriately hardened security configurations and permissions of key configuration files (e.g. /etc/security/access.conf, /etc/hosts, /etc/nsswitch.conf).
- Use the 'noexec' parameter to mount partitions which users have write access to.
- Perform an inventory of binaries, determine which ones users need to run, and for all others either uninstall them or remove the setuid permission.

- Implement software-based firewalls for both internal and external network interfaces, for IPv4 and IPv6 (or disable IPv6 support).
- Perform tasks with least privileges.
- Implement specific configurations based on server roles (e.g. if running Apache HTTP Server, harden as per Apache hardening guidance).
- As far as practical, implement vendor security guidance for specific Linux distributions.

Further information

Further information on hardening Red Hat Enterprise Linux 9 is available from Red Hat in their [Security Hardening](#) publication.

Further information on hardening SUSE Linux Enterprise Server 15 SP5 is available from SUSE in their [Security Guide](#) publication.

Further information on hardening Ubuntu 20.04 LTS and later is available from Canonical in their [Basic Ubuntu Security Guide](#) and [Ubuntu Server Guide](#).

Contact details

If you have any questions regarding this guidance you can [write to us](#) or call us on 1300 CYBER1 (1300 292 371).

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