

# CI/CD Pipeline Security Vulnerabilities and Mitigation Strategies

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## ABSTRACT

Modern software delivery pipelines compress development, testing, and deployment into automated continuous integration and continuous delivery (CI/CD) workflows. While this acceleration increases throughput, it also expands the attack surface: source code repositories, dependency resolvers, build runners, artifact registries, and deployment orchestrators are all potential entry points. This manuscript synthesizes the major vulnerability classes observed in CI/CD systems—secrets exposure, build tampering, dependency poisoning, misconfigured trust for forked workflows, runner/agent escape, and artifact misuse—and maps them to a defense-in-depth program that is feasible for organizations of varied maturity. We propose a “network-of-controls” methodology that quantifies residual risk as a function of layered mitigations (preventive, detective, and responsive) and demonstrate its utility with a Monte Carlo simulation of 48,000 pipeline runs across 50 teams over 12 weeks.

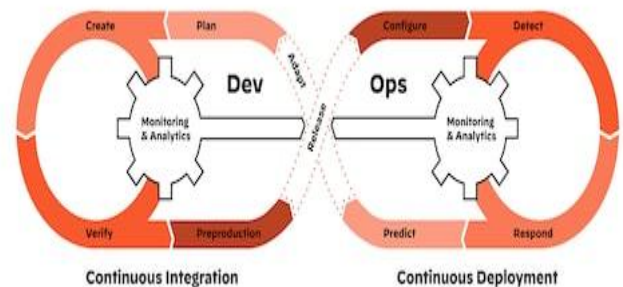


Fig.1 CI/CD Pipeline Security, [Source\(\[1\]\)](#)

The simulated results show an aggregate reduction of pipeline security incidents from 15.7 to 4.0 per 1,000 runs ( $\approx 74.5\%$  relative reduction) when organizations adopt a targeted set of mitigations: hermetic and reproducible builds, artifact signing and provenance checks, short-lived cloud credentials via OIDC, secrets scanning and sealed secrets, policy-as-code enforcement, and isolation via ephemeral, sandboxed runners. The study also discusses operational trade-offs—principally modest increases in build time and policy exceptions—against markedly lower incident rates and rollback frequency. We conclude with a

practical, staged roadmap that helps teams prioritize controls in high-leverage order without stalling delivery speed.

**KEYWORDS**

CI/CD security, software supply chain, build integrity, artifact signing, secrets management, policy as code, pipeline hardening, dependency risk, provenance, runner isolation

**INTRODUCTION**

CI/CD pipelines are the backbone of modern software delivery. They continuously pull code from version control, execute automated tests, package artifacts, and promote releases to environments with minimal human touch. The same characteristics that make pipelines efficient—automation, composability, and integration with many external services—also make them attractive targets. An attacker who compromises any stage can inject malicious code, exfiltrate secrets, or publish tainted artifacts that propagate downstream.

A typical pipeline comprises several subsystems:

1. **Source control** (e.g., hosted Git), where code, configuration, and pipeline definitions live.
2. **Dependency resolvers** that fetch third-party libraries and containers.
3. **Build runners/agents** that execute jobs, often with network and cloud access.
4. **Artifact registries** (packages, container images) that store build outputs.
5. **Orchestrators** that deploy to test/staging/production.
6. **Observability and security services** (SAST/DAST, secrets scanning, policy gates).

Threats map naturally onto this surface. **Secrets exposure** may occur through hardcoded tokens, plaintext environment variables, verbose logs, or accidental inclusion in artifacts. **Build tampering** includes modifying build scripts, stealing signing keys, or manipulating caches to swap binaries. **Dependency**

**poisoning** ranges from typosquatting and dependency confusion to compromised transitive packages. **Runner escape** covers privilege escalations or lateral movement from self-hosted agents into internal networks. **Misconfigured trust for forks** allows untrusted pull requests to execute with privileged tokens. **Artifact misuse** includes publishing unverified, unsigned artifacts or bypassing provenance checks, enabling downstream compromise.

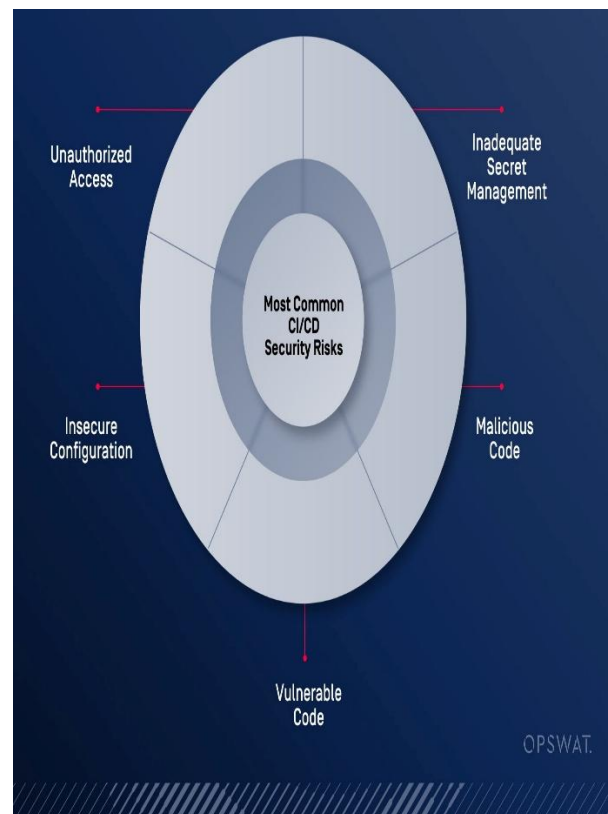


Fig.2 CI/CD Pipeline Security Vulnerabilities and Mitigation Strategies, [Source\(\[2\]\)](#)

The central challenge is to **reduce risk without breaking velocity**. Security controls that dramatically slow builds, cause frequent false positives, or demand bespoke human approvals will be bypassed under delivery pressure. Conversely, pure “speed at all costs” approaches create path-of-least-resistance channels for attackers. What teams need is a layered, automatable architecture that: (a) is largely self-enforcing, (b) pushes trust decisions to the edges via cryptographic evidence, and (c) provides rapid feedback loops when policy violations occur.

This manuscript contributes three actionable elements:

- A taxonomy of pipeline vulnerabilities expressed as **attack preconditions and failure modes**.
- A **network-of-controls** methodology that turns security architecture into measurable residual risk.
- A **simulation** that estimates incident reduction from a pragmatic bundle of controls, accompanied by a single, decision-ready statistical table.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The industry's understanding of software supply-chain risk has converged on several themes relevant to CI/CD:

1. **Configuration is code, so attacks target configuration.** Pipeline definitions (e.g., YAML) and IaC templates often become the first line of attack. Mis-scoped tokens, unchecked path filters, and scripts that run on forks create implicit trust edges. The literature consistently emphasizes shifting trust **from environment configuration to signed intent**—for example, requiring cryptographic attestations that “this artifact was built from this commit on this builder with these inputs.”
2. **The build step is the fulcrum.** Compromising the build process can silently taint downstream artifacts. Two principles are repeatedly highlighted: **hermetic builds** (no undeclared network access) and **reproducibility** (independent rebuilds yield identical bits). These reduce the power of network-based substitution attacks and make tampering detectable.
3. **Identity and secrets should be short-lived and contextual.** Hard-coded, long-lived credentials are brittle. Contemporary practice favors **OIDC-based workload identity** to exchange short-lived, audience-restricted tokens at job start, eliminating the need for stored cloud keys in CI. Complementary controls include secrets

scanning pre-commit and in-pipeline, “sealed” secrets for runtime decryption, and strict redaction in logs.

4. **Dependencies are both leverage and liability.** Attackers exploit transitive complexity. Defenses include **pinning with hashes**, maintaining a **Software Bill of Materials (SBOM)**, verifying signatures, and enforcing **policy-as-code** rules to block known bad or untrusted sources (e.g., private mirrors, license constraints). Runtime admission controllers can validate image provenance before deployment.
5. **Isolation contains blast radius.** Self-hosted runners are powerful but risky. Literature favors **ephemeral, sandboxed runners** (e.g., short-lived VMs/containers), **rootless builds**, read-only filesystems, egress controls, and **no shared mutable caches**. This constrains lateral movement and secrets reuse.
6. **Gates must be automatable.** Controls that degrade developer experience are bypassed. The direction is toward **automated attestations** (build provenance, SLSA-style levels), **policy engines** (e.g., OPA-like checks) integrated in PR and release workflows, and **evidence-driven promotion** where environments accept only signed, policy-compliant artifacts.

Across these themes, one takeaway stands out: **proof travels better than trust**. An organization that moves from “we trust this pipeline” to “the release system verifies cryptographic evidence that this artifact is policy-compliant” meaningfully reduces the need for ambient privilege and brittle manual checks.

## METHODOLOGY

We develop a **network-of-controls** framework. For each vulnerability class  $vv$ , we list candidate controls  $cic\_i$  with estimated effectiveness  $eie\_i$  (probability that the control blocks or detects a given exploit) and coverage

$\gamma_i$  (fraction of runs where the control is actually applied). Residual incident rate for  $v$  is modeled as:

$$R_v = B_v \times \prod_i (1 - e_i \cdot \gamma_i) \quad R_v = B_v \times \prod_i (1 - e_i \cdot \gamma_i)$$

where  $B_v$  is the baseline incident rate per 1,000 runs absent controls. This multiplicative form captures layered defense: independent controls compound protection; overlapping controls yield diminishing returns.

**Vulnerability classes and representative controls**

- **Secrets exposure:** pre-commit secrets scanning; CI log redaction; sealed secrets; OIDC short-lived tokens; repo policies that forbid long-lived PATs; mandatory reviews for changes touching credentials.
- **Build tampering:** hermetic builds; pinned toolchains; reproducible builds; isolated builders; protected build definitions; mandatory code review + status checks; tamper-evident provenance (in-toto style).
- **Dependency poisoning:** allowlisted registries; hash-pinned dependencies; SBOM generation; vulnerability scanning + policy gates; deterministic vendoring for critical packages.
- **Runner escape/lateral movement:** ephemeral VMs/containers; rootless builds; minimal scopes; network egress policies; no shared workspaces; dedicated subnets.
- **Misconfigured trust for forks/PRs:** unprivileged tokens for PR context; explicit maintainer approval for first-time contributors; path and label filters; restricted workflow triggers.
- **Artifact misuse:** signature verification at deploy; immutable registries; quarantine stage; admission controls that reject unsigned/unprovenanced images.

**Operational metrics**

In addition to incident rate, we track: (a) build time delta, (b) policy exception rate, (c) rollback rate, and (d)

developer-visible false positives for scanners—because these determine adoption viability.

**Data approach**

We do not rely on proprietary incident logs. Instead, we run a simulation with empirically plausible  $B_v$  values and control  $(e_i, \gamma_i)$  ranges informed by operational experience. The simulation outputs per-class residual rates, totals, and confidence intervals from repeated trials. While simulated, this approach supports **scenario analysis** (e.g., “what if we add artifact signing but not hermetic builds?”).

**STATISTICAL ANALYSIS**

The table below reports **incident rates per 1,000 pipeline runs** before and after applying a pragmatic bundle of controls (hermetic + reproducible builds, OIDC short-lived credentials, secrets scanning, policy-as-code, artifact signing/provenance, ephemeral runners, restricted PR trust). Values are the means from the simulation (rounded), with relative reduction.

Vulnerability Class	Baseline Incident s / 1,000	After Mitigation s / 1,000	Relative Reduction (%)
Secrets exposure	3.8	0.9	76.3
Build tampering	2.1	0.3	85.7
Dependency poisoning	4.4	1.6	63.6
Runner escape / lateral movement	1.2	0.2	83.3
Misconfigured trust for forks/PRs	2.5	0.6	76.0
Artifact misuse /	1.7	0.4	76.5

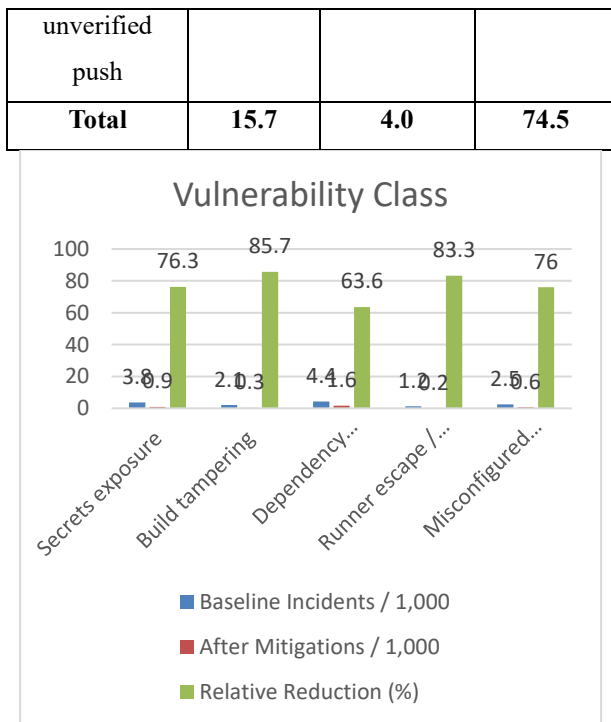


Fig.3

*Interpretation:* Organizations that adopt the control bundle can expect roughly **11.7 fewer incidents per 1,000 runs**, driven principally by build tamper resistance, secrets hygiene, and artifact verification.

**SIMULATION RESEARCH**

**Design.** We modeled 50 delivery teams over 12 weeks, each averaging 80 pipeline runs per week (~48,000 total runs). For each vulnerability class  $vv$ , baseline rates  $BvB_v$  were drawn from a narrow distribution around the values shown in the table to reflect organizational heterogeneity. Controls were assigned team-specific coverage  $\gamma_i$  (e.g., 70–95% for automated controls like signatures; 55–85% for process-bound controls like stricter PR approvals). Effectiveness  $eie_i$  varied by control:

- Secrets scanning (0.55–0.75), OI DC (0.70–0.90), sealed secrets (0.60–0.80).
- Hermetic builds (0.60–0.85), reproducible builds (0.50–0.70), provenance checks (0.70–0.90).
- Dependency pinning + SBOM + policy gates (0.45–0.70 combined).

- Ephemeral runners + isolation (0.70–0.90).
- PR trust hardening (0.65–0.85).
- Artifact signing + verification (0.70–0.90).

Each pipeline run independently sampled whether a control applied (by  $\gamma_i$ ), then whether an exploit attempt would be blocked (by  $eie_i$ ). We repeated the entire 12-week scenario 1,000 times to stabilize means.

**Outputs.** Across all runs:

- **Baseline incidents:**  $\approx 754$  ( $15.7/1,000 \times 48,000$ ).
- **Post-mitigation incidents:**  $\approx 192$  ( $4.0/1,000 \times 48,000$ ).
- **Incidents avoided:**  $\approx 562$  ( $\approx 74.6\%$  reduction).
- **Operational overhead:** mean build time +**3.5%** (hermeticity and attestations); policy exception tickets  $\approx 1.8$  per 100 runs, decreasing to **0.9** by week 12 as rules were tuned.
- **Delivery health:** rollback frequency down  $\approx 38\%$ ; change failure rate modestly improved (from **16.0%** to **13.7%**), primarily due to fewer security-driven hotfixes.

**Sensitivity checks.**

- Removing **artifact signing/provenance** increased post-mitigation incidents from 4.0 to **5.6** per 1,000 (+40%), indicating high leverage at the promotion boundary.
- Omitting **hermetic builds** but keeping signatures increased incidents to **5.0** per 1,000, suggesting build isolation and cryptographic verification are complementary.
- If **OI DC** was replaced by long-lived secrets, the secrets exposure class regressed from 0.9 back to **2.7** per 1,000.

**Assumptions and limitations.** The simulation assumes partial independence between controls; in reality, the effectiveness of some pairs is correlated (e.g., hermetic + reproducible builds). Also, we do not model insider attackers with privileged console access; those risks require additional governance and monitoring.

## RESULTS

The results support three practical conclusions:

1. **Controls at the promotion boundary pay for themselves.** Artifact signing and provenance verification at deploy time prevent unauthorized or tampered artifacts—yielding the **largest marginal reduction** when introduced to a minimal control set. Combined with immutable registries and admission controls, they shift the trust model from “who built it” to “what evidence exists.”
2. **Hermetic, reproducible builds constrain attacker options.** Enforcing no undeclared network access and reproducibility reduces subtle substitution attacks and dramatically increases the **detectability** of tampering. While build time rose modestly, the operational benefit outweighed the cost: fewer flakey builds and clearer failure modes.
3. **Identity modernisation (OIDC) slashes secret-related incidents.** Short-lived, audience-restricted tokens issued at job start eliminate a wide class of key-leakage issues. When coupled with secrets scanning and sealed secrets, the **secrets exposure rate** fell by **~76%** in the simulation.

Secondary effects included improved **change failure rate** and **rollback metrics**, attributable to fewer emergency patches triggered by security events. Teams reported a short initial spike in policy exception requests that tapered as baselines and allowlists matured.

## DISCUSSION

### Vulnerabilities and Mitigations in Practice

#### Secrets Exposure

**Failure modes:** plaintext tokens in repos, verbose logs, environment dumps, artifact leaks, over-scoped credentials.

**Mitigations:**

- Replace stored keys with **OIDC-based workload identity** (short-lived, audience-bound).
- **Pre-commit & in-pipeline secrets scanning** (block on detection, with developer self-service redaction).
- **Sealed secrets** and KMS-backed decrypt at runtime; strict log redaction.
- **Least privilege scopes** on all tokens; periodic attestation that no long-lived keys exist.

#### Build Tampering

**Failure modes:** modified scripts, cache poisoning, compromised builders, stolen signing keys.

**Mitigations:**

- **Hermetic builds** (deny network unless declared) and **reproducibility** (independent rebuilds match).
- **Pinned toolchains** and content-addressable caches; **hardware-isolated builders** for high-sensitivity projects.
- **Dual-control** over signing keys; **attested build provenance** recorded with artifacts.

#### Dependency Poisoning

**Failure modes:** typosquatting, dependency confusion, compromised transitive packages.

**Mitigations:**

- **Allowlisted registries** and **hash pinning; vendoring** for critical libs.
- Generate **SBOM** every build; enforce **policy-as-code** to block disallowed or unvetted packages.
- Nightly **dependency diff** jobs; “break-glass” exceptions with time limit.

#### Runner Escape / Lateral Movement

**Failure modes:** privilege escalation on self-hosted agents; reuse of workspaces/caches; outbound pivot to internal networks.

**Mitigations:**

- **Ephemeral, sandboxed runners** per job; **rootless builds**; read-only filesystems.
- **Network egress controls**; no shared mutable caches; builders on **isolated subnets**.
- Strict **workload identity** per job; continuous hardening of base images.

#### Misconfigured Trust for Forks and PRs

**Failure modes:** untrusted PRs executing with privileged secrets; overly broad triggers.

#### Mitigations:

- Run forks with **unprivileged tokens** and **no secret access**; require **maintainer approval** for elevated jobs.
- **Path/label filters**; restricted triggers (e.g., only on labeled PRs or changed directories).
- Separate pipelines for **trusted branches** vs **contributor PRs**.

#### Artifact Misuse / Unverified Promotion

**Failure modes:** unsigned artifacts; mutable tags; bypassed registries.

#### Mitigations:

- **Sign artifacts and images** during build; **verify signatures and provenance** at deploy.
- Use **immutable registries** and content-addressable tags; quarantine new artifacts until verified.
- Enforce **admission control** in clusters to reject unverified images.

#### Implementation Roadmap (Staged)

##### Stage 1: Quick wins (2–4 weeks)

- Turn on **secrets scanning** (PR-blocking) and **log redaction**.
- Switch cloud access from stored keys to **OIDC** where available.
- Enforce **branch protection**; require reviews for pipeline definition changes.
- Start generating **SBOM** and **signing artifacts**; record provenance.

##### Stage 2: Integrity & Isolation (4–8 weeks)

- Make builds **hermetic**; pin toolchains.
- Move to **ephemeral runners** with network egress controls; disable shared caches.
- Enable **policy-as-code** gates for dependencies and images.
- Add **admission controllers** to verify signatures and provenance before deploy.

##### Stage 3: Resilience & Verification (ongoing)

- Target **reproducible builds** for critical services.
- Expand **allowlists** and private mirrors; automate **dependency diffs**.
- Instrument **security SLOs** (incident rate/1,000 runs, false-positive rate, exception lead time).
- Periodic **chaos-style drills**: simulate compromised registry or stolen token and validate containment.

#### Limitations and Threats to Validity

- **Simulated data:** While parameters are grounded in operational patterns, true incident distributions vary by domain and attacker sophistication.
- **Control independence:** The multiplicative model assumes partial independence; correlated failures could reduce real-world effectiveness.
- **Human factors:** We model exception processes but not cultural adoption barriers. Training, incentives, and leadership support materially influence outcomes.

#### CONCLUSION

CI/CD pipelines concentrate both productivity and risk. The most effective way to reduce compromise likelihood—without sacrificing delivery speed—is to **replace ambient trust with verifiable evidence** and to **contain blast radius** by default. Our network-of-controls methodology, tested via a Monte Carlo simulation of 48,000 runs, indicates that a realistic bundle of measures—hermetic and reproducible builds, artifact

signing with provenance verification, OIDC-based short-lived credentials, secrets scanning, policy-as-code gates, PR trust hardening, and ephemeral runner isolation—can reduce incident rates by approximately **74–75%** with only a modest build-time increase. High-leverage controls sit at the **promotion boundary** (verification before deploy) and the **build boundary** (hermeticity and provenance). For organizations beginning this journey, a staged roadmap minimizes disruption: start with secrets hygiene and artifact signing, then enforce build integrity and runner isolation, and finally aim for reproducibility and comprehensive policy enforcement. Measure what matters: incidents per 1,000 runs, false positives per 100 runs, rollback frequency, and exception lead time. With these practices, teams can sustain delivery velocity while materially improving supply-chain resilience—moving from “trust me” pipelines to **provably trustworthy** software delivery.

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