Guarding Sensitive Sensor Data against Malicious Mobile Applications

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Abstract— **With increasing usage of sensor data for medical purposes, the ability to secure sensitive features in mobile sensor data from adversarial applications is a continuous challenge. This paper introduces a random anonymization algorithm, *SparCTym*, as a method for anonymizing sensitive features in walking accelerometer data while maintaining the utility of the data. *SparCTym* was implemented in the Android framework of a Nexus S phone and tested with activity recognition applications.**

Keywords— accelerometer, sensor data, Android, anonymized, sensitive data, Sparse#, SparCTym, Nexus S

I. INTRODUCTION

Parallel with maintaining the utility of mobile sensor data, there is a growing concern and interest in the role that sensors play in the compromise of a mobile user's privacy. The potential risk of an adversarial application utilizing mobile sensor data to exploit a user's privacy is ever present and a subject that has to be continuously analyzed and innovatively addressed.

While a user may be agreeable in allowing the use of his mobile sensor data for medical or research purposes, he does not want an adversarial application to capture sensitive information in his data.

Supervised training is a commonly used method for labeling data and building models to detect simple everyday activities [1][2][4][9]. It employs activity recognition algorithms and feature extraction to classify these activities. Over the years, classification techniques have proven to be very effective on mobile accelerometer sensor data. However, now, because of the accuracy with which activities are classified, the problem has arisen concerning the importance and the need to "unclassify" or hide features in a mobile user's accelerometer data that can be used to identify sensitive information about that mobile user.

Alongside the improvement in the ability to accurately classify a mobile user's activities, another privacy and security risk has arisen with Android's new 'Activity Recognition' permission. This permission is hidden under 'Other' permissions and does not require a mobile user's intervention [13].

Ravi et al. show how accelerometer sensor data is used to classify activities such as standing, walking, running, climbing upstairs, climbing down stairs, sit-ups and vacuuming [1]. Other areas of research have taken this type of study further and show how, seemingly, innocent mobile accelerometer sensor data can be used to recognize a mobile user's daily activities such as walking, jogging, climbing stairs, sitting, and standing[3].

Using the accelerometer and gyroscope sensors, [9] focuses on recognizing the following activities; sitting, laying, standing, attaching to a table, walking, jogging, running, jumping, pushups, going down stairs, going up stairs and cycling. Person recognition is the study of [4] and is achieved by using supervised training techniques on a mobile user's accelerometer sensor data to determine specific activities.

Even though activity recognition techniques have enhanced and proven to be beneficial in areas such as health and medical research, these advancements, also, bring an increase in the risk of a mobile user sharing sensitive activity data with, potentially, adversarial applications. For example, a mobile user experiencing a limp, during the recovery from a recent knee surgery or another mobile user who has had a limp for years, both will not want to give an adversarial application their raw accelerometer data as it could reveal vulnerabilities in their walking data.

To address the problem of, potentially, sending sensitive features in activity data to calling applications, we propose a modification to the Android operating system with a feature anonymizing/utility preserving algorithm called *SparCTym*. The purpose of this algorithm is to randomly anonymize sensitive features in a mobile user's raw accelerometer walking data while maintaining its utility. Using the *SparCTym* algorithm, we aim to anonymize the following key attributes of accelerometer data: entropy, mean and correlation. There are some features, such as max and min that are expected to stay the same between the anonymized and original data, because of nature of the *SparCTym* algorithm.

II. RELATED WORK

Raij et al. provide mobile sensor data that can be utilized by a requesting application, while protecting the privacy of users [5]. It proposes the privacy framework, IPShield which accomplishes two major tasks: A mobile user defines a 'Blacklist' of inferences that should not to be shared with a calling application and a 'Whitelist' of inferences that can be shared with the application; a graphical model is created to reveal what an application already knows about a mobile user. This model is then used to determine what type of data will be sent to a calling application: suppressed, (no data are sent), perturbed, (noise is introduced into the data, prior to releasing

This material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under awards 1241768 and 1637291.

it to an application) or synthetic, (data unrelated to the sensor data).

In another study, a modification to the Android framework called "Override" [6] is introduced to intercept raw sensor data, prior to it reaching a calling application and depending on rules set by the mobile user, either perturbs it or replaces it with synthetic data. Our study differs from the previous two, as there are no rules or anything to setup by the mobile user.

Activities in [7] were recognized using the K-nearest neighbor (K-NN) algorithm. A small database is created with the training data from activities such as walking, running, climbing up, etc. After training and classifying the data initially collected, K-NN is used to classify new records of each activity performed for a specified time by comparing them with the already trained data to obtain the Euclidian distance between points. The new record is classified as its nearest neighbor. The *SparCTym* algorithm, also, creates a mini database. However, this database differs from that of [7], as it is created by logging, between one to six minutes, each 'X' value with the first occurrence of a specified truncation of 'X and its corresponding 'Y' and 'Z' values..

A new multi-objective loss function is used in [10] to train convolutional auto-encoders (CAEs) to provide a method for anonymizing accelerometer and gyroscope data from a mobile phone. In our study, an encoder is not used.

Prior work [8] explored randomly anonymizing mobile sensors' data on an Android mobile phone and testing the manipulated data on various Android sensor applications. This paper extends that study by exploiting the randomness of accelerometer data to obscure sensitive features in that data.

The remaining sections unveil the methodology and test results after implementing the *SparCTym* algorithm in the Android framework.

III. Methodology

The purpose of the *SparCTym* algorithm is to anonymize sensitive features in a mobile user's accelerometer walking data while maintaining the utility of the data. In this study, the features focused on for anonymization are entropy, correlation and mean. These elements were chosen because they are common features used in activity recognition algorithms.

The *SparCTym* algorithm operates as follows:

- For time less than or equal to six minutes, save in an array (arrayB), the first occurrence of each 'X' value truncated to a specified length and its corresponding 'Y' and 'Z' values. Count the number of unique truncated "X" values that have occurred. These counts are known as Sparse#s, (Sparse numbers). Once the time is greater than the time chosen for collecting data, select the three largest Sparse#s These values will be known as max1, max2 and max3.
- For each new 'X' value, check to see if the truncated value of 'X' exists in arrayB. If it exists, select the 'X' value in arrayB and its corresponding 'Y' and 'Z' values. If the truncated value of 'X' is not in arrayB, then select the original "X', 'Y' and 'Z' values and randomly anonymize 'X'.
- Note: If the Sparse# of an "X' value equals to max1, max2 or max3, then there is a greater probability that "X' will be randomly anonymized than if the Sparse# does not equal to max1, max2 or max3.

***SparCTym* Algorithm:**

```
For time < = 1 minute
   For every unique trunc(X)
      Insert X, Y, Z into ArrayB
      Count unique trunc(X)
      Save 3 largest counts in max1, max2 and max3
      Anonymize X
      Output X,Y,Z
   End;
End;
For time > 1 minute
   For every new X value
      If trunc(newX) is in arrayB
           If X = max1, max2 or max3
                If flag = 1
                  Randomly anonymize X
                Else
                  Do not anonymize X.
                End
           End;
      Else if trunc(new X) not in array B and flag = 0
             Randomly anonymize X and use original Y and Z.
      End;
      Output X,Y,Z
   End;
End;
```

Fig. 1, SparCType Algorithm

IV. Results

Over a period of three days and for eight different lengths of time, using a Nexus S phone, a mobile user captured accelerometer walking data. Table 1, Table 2 and Table 3 hold the results of calculations performed on that data.

From these tables, it can be seen that the entropy of the anonymized accelerometer walking data (Entropy-A) is different from that of the entropy of the original data (Entropy-O). Also, the anonymized accelerometer mean (Mean-A) is notably different than that of the original mean (Mean-O).

The results, also, show that the Max (Max-A) and Min (Min-A) anonymized X, Y and Z values were sometimes different from those of the original Max (Max-O) and Min (Min-O) original values. This would be expected, because if trunc(X) is found in array(B), there is a good chance that the original max and min values will be reused in the anonymized data.

Entropy, correlation and means are calculated for different reasons. Correlation of the anonymized X, Y and Z values with the original values portrays how significantly different the anonymized data are different from the original data. Entropy shows the difference in the average number of bits needed to describe the original and anonymized X, Y and Z data. Mean gives insight into how the data are distributed.

Two activity recognition applications were installed on the Nexus S phone to capture the mobile user's activity when walking [11][12]. One application [11] was installed on a Galaxy S7 phone to capture the user's walking data at the same time that the Nexus S phone was recording data. Fig. 2 and Fig. 3 are sample screen shots from the Galaxy S7 and Nexus S

TABLE I. CALCULATIONS ON THE X-AXIS OF SAMPLES TAKEN.

X-axis	Entropy-O	Entropy-A	Corr(x,x')	Max-O	Max-A	Min-O	Min-A	Mean-O	Mean-A	Approx Time(min)
1	9.413628	10.29177	0.833334	19.34515	19.05785	-5.47793	-5.42047	5.306627	4.456562	3
2	9.357947	10.39957	0.816822	19.44092	19.44092	-4.86502	-4.86502	5.67368	4.76427	4
3	9.163893	10.34524	0.613192	14.5759	14.5759	-18.6173	-18.6173	-3.43012	-1.74553	2.4
4	9.195563	10.21246	0.905513	17.27656	17.27656	-7.53484	-7.53484	2.701332	2.494276	3
5	9.525144	9.851024	0.823844	17.27656	17.27656	-7.53484	7.53484	7.500744	5.953381	3.5
6	8.588724	10.09314	0.625372	17.27656	17.27656	-7.53484	-7.53484	-1.66484	-0.81871	4.5
7	10.54151	9.705886	0.786994	17.27656	17.27656	-7.53484	-7.53484	7.427767	5.847743	4.2
8	9.717024	10.41499	0.792897	17.27656	17.27656	-7.53484	-7.53484	7.850074	6.087719	3
9	9.634911	10.20446	0.821203	17.27656	17.27656	-7.53484	-7.53484	6.725572	5.320417	2
10	9.856614	10.6956	0.76593	17.27656	17.27656	-7.53484	-7.53484	8.657008	6.65247	6

TABLE II. CALCULATIONS ON THE Y-AXIS OF SAMPLES TAKEN.

Y-axis	Entropy-O	Entropy-A	Corr(y,y')	Max-O	Max-A	Min-O	Min-A	Mean-O	Mean-A	Approx Time(min)
1	8.55523	8.568587	0.238515	19.6133	19.6133	-5.76524	-5.76524	7.73322	7.073151	3
2	9.140095	8.44794	0.200646	12.718	19.6133	-2.18351	-2.18351	7.596848	6.993391	4
3	9.277036	8.447172	0.376482	-18.6173	19.6133	-2.48997	-2.48997	-9.02831	8.479211	2.4
4	9.387105	8.499581	0.452979	19.6133	19.6133	-1.89621	-1.89621	8.917103	8.773177	3
5	9.254084	8.413321	0.395204	19.6133	19.6133	-1.89621	-1.89621	4.74731	-1.89621	3,5
6	8.333823	7.742663	0.191221	19.6133	19.6133	-1.89621	-1.89621	9.075225	6.587124	4.5
7	9.476378	8.559606	0.192524	19.6133	19.6133	-1.89621	-1.89621	6.181217	6.376716	4.2
8	9.627792	8.471075	0.213658	19.6133	19.6133	-1.89621	-1.89621	5.157546	5.804249	3
9	9.553783	8.610077	0.056359	19.6133	19.6133	-1.89621	-1.89621	6.617608	5.746302	2
10	9.500363	8.507697	0.044827	19.6133	19.6133	-1.89621	-1.89621	4.534509	6.14974	6

TABLE III. CALCULATIONS ON THE Z-AXIS OF SAMPLES TAKEN.

Z-axis	Entropy-O	Entropy-A	Corr(z,z')	Max-O	Max-A	Min-O	Min-A	Mean-O	Mean-A	Approx Time(min)
1	9.161894	8.562146	0.304118	15.32289	15.32289	-14.6142	-11.9135	-0.5093	0.487325	3
2	9.012137	8.469517	0.230011	12.718	12.718	-13.6374	-13.6374	-0.65951	0.315711	4
3	9.01959	8.368485	0.473301	13.48414	13.48414	-18.6748	-16.453	-0.42243	0.275771	2.4
4	9.036708	8.271748	0.396542	11.6454	11.6454	-11.3581	-11.3581	0.2228	1.500955	3
5	9.388446	8.495653	0.559651	11.6454	11.6454	-11.3581	-11.3581	0.943359	-11.3581	3.5
6	8.420772	7.736031	0.271345	11.6454	11.6454	-11.3581	-11.3581	2.488453	3.631723	4.5
7	9.455842	8.516423	0.161946	11.6454	11.6454	-11.3581	-11.3581	-0.10294	0.646943	4.2
8	9.522114	8.351078	0.140925	11.6454	11.6454	-11.3581	-11.3581	5.157546	0.971274	3
9	9.222059	8.450561	0.011765	11.6454	11.6454	-11.3581	-11.3581	-0.05821	1.134066	2
10	9.498556	8.381469	0.056228	11.6454	11.6454	-11.3581	-11.3581	-0.04764	0.643115	6

phones, respectively, taken after data used to calculate statistics in row 7 in the tables for the X, Y and Z axes was captured.

Two activity recognition applications were installed on the Nexus S phone to capture the mobile user's activity when walking [11][12]. One application [11] was installed on a Galaxy S7 phone to capture the user's walking data at the same time that the Nexus S phone was recording data. Fig. 2 and Fig. 3 are sample screen shots from the Galaxy S7 and Nexus S phones, respectively, when capturing data for data set 7 in Tables 1, 2 and 3.

Referencing these figures, it can be seen that both phones started recording the mobile user's walking data at the same time for, approximately, the same amount of time.

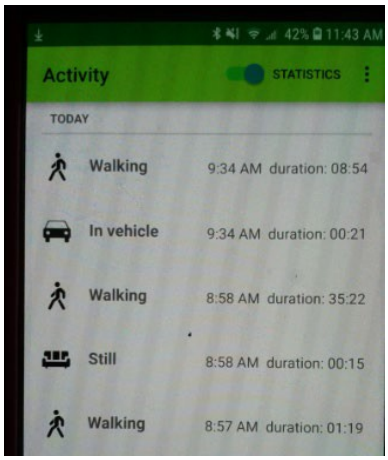


Fig. 2. Galaxy S7 Phone

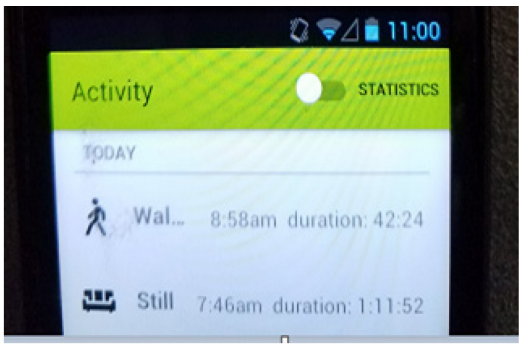
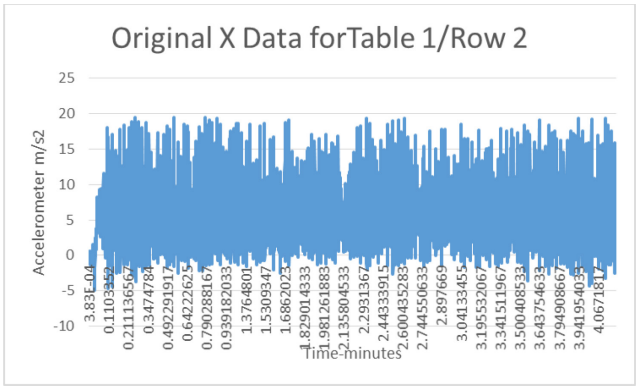


Fig. 3. Nexus 5 Phone

Graphs 1-12 show how the anonymized data for datasets 2, and 10 look when compared to the data of their original counterparts. Even though the Max and Min values in Table 1, Table 2 and Table 3 are sometimes equal to each other, the graphs, along with statistics such as correlation, reveal how significantly the anonymized data for the Y and Z axes differ from that of the original Y and Z axes. Histograms of the X, Y and Z axes of dataset 2, also, show, after passing the original data through the *SparCTym* algorithm, how uncorrelated the original and anonymized data are.

In addition, the mobile user recorded running for approximately 2 minutes and driving a vehicle for 3 minutes. These activities were recorded by the activity applications installed on the Nexus S phone and anonymized by the *SparCTym* algorithm.



Graph 1 –Original X Axis Data for Table 1/Row 2 Stats

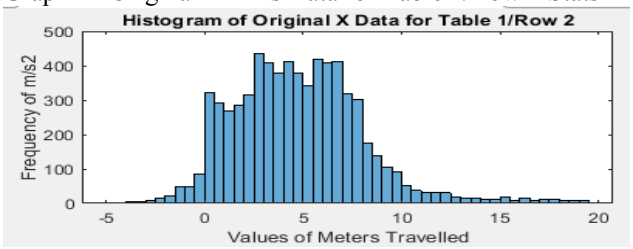
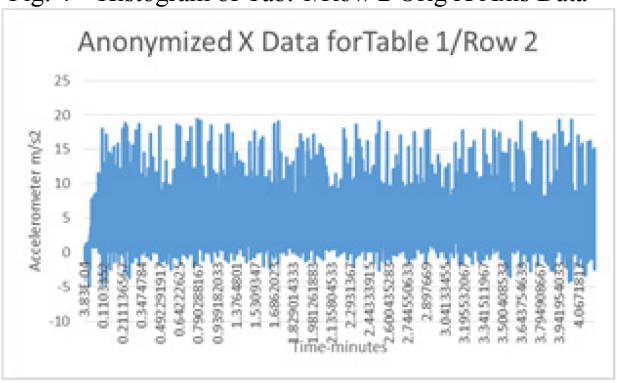


Fig. 4 – Histogram of Tab. 1/Row 2 Orig X Axis Data



Graph 2 –Anonymized X Axis Data for Table 1/Row 2 Stats

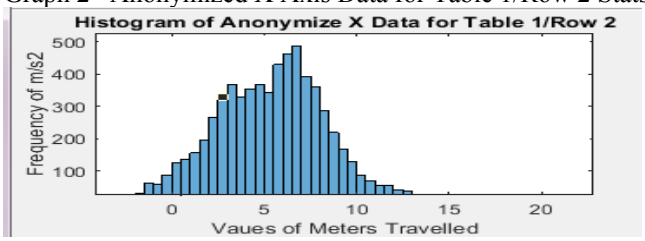
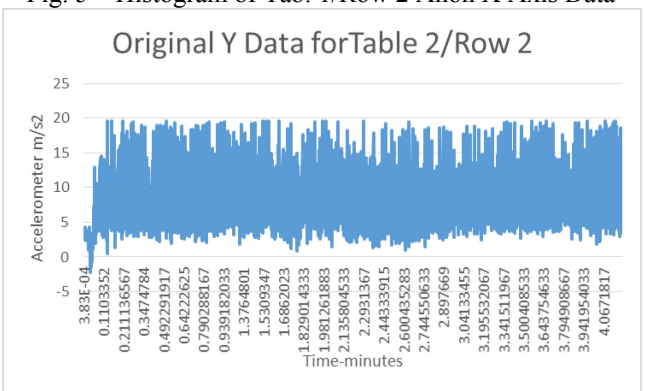


Fig. 5 – Histogram of Tab. 1/Row 2 Anon X Axis Data



Graph 3 –Original Y Axis Data for Table 2/Row 2 Stats

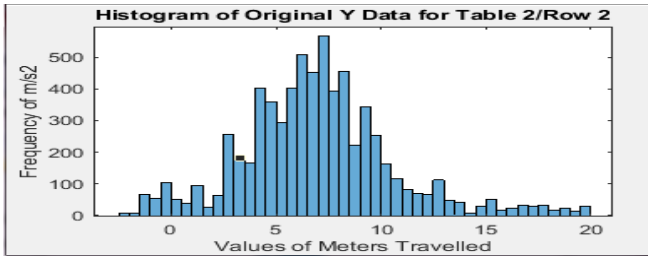
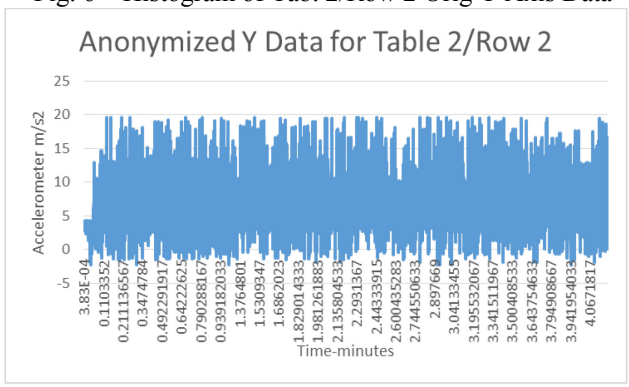


Fig. 6 – Histogram of Tab. 2/Row 2 Orig Y Axis Data



Graph 4 –Anonymized Y Axis Data for Table 2/Row 2 Stats

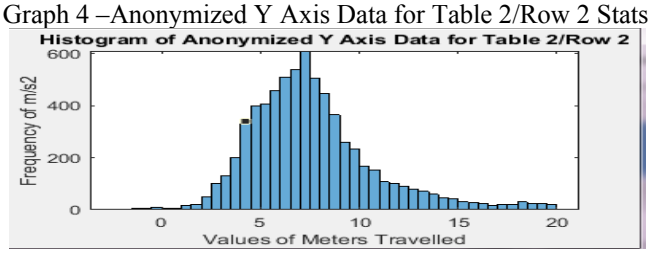
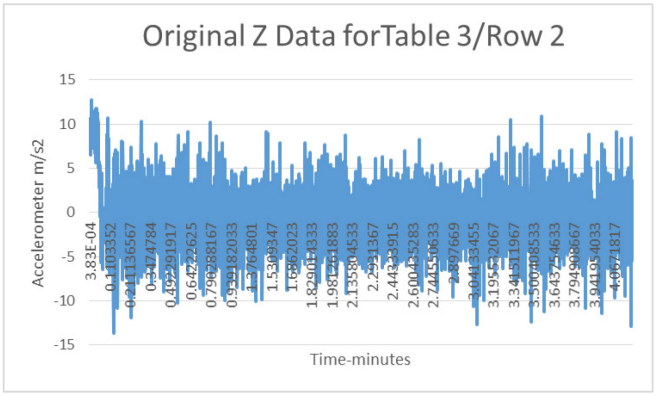


Fig. 7 – Histogram of Tab. 2/Row 2 Anon Y Axis Data



Graph 5 –Original Z Axis Data for Table 3/Row 2 Stats

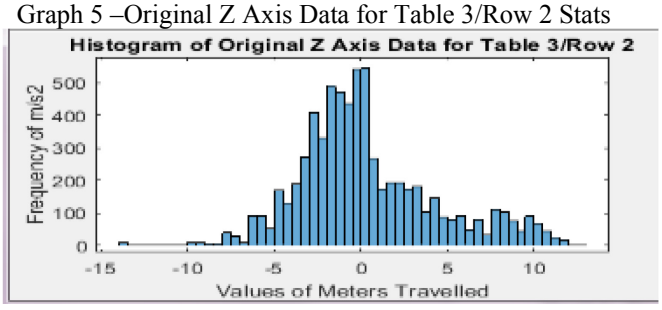
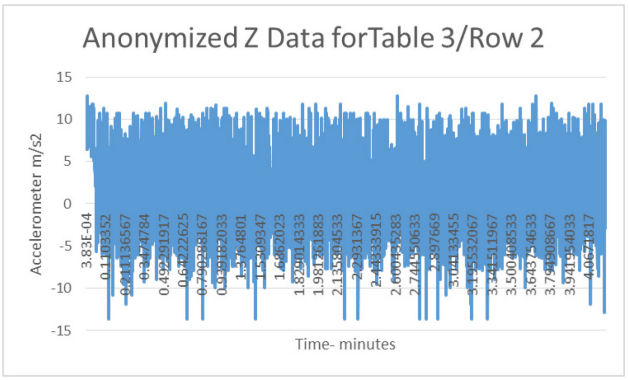


Fig. 8 – Histogram of Tab. 3/Row 2 Orig Z Axis Data



Graph 6 - Anonymized Z Axis Data for Table 3/Row 2 Stats

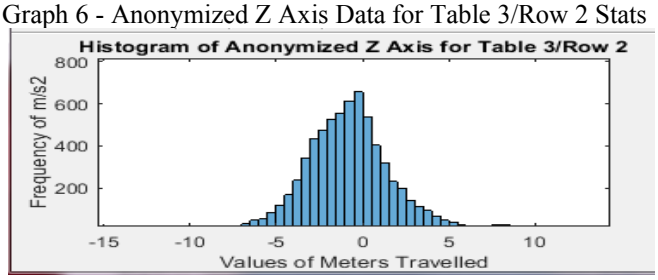
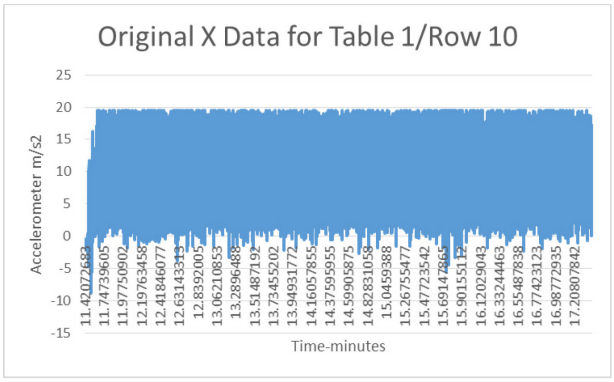
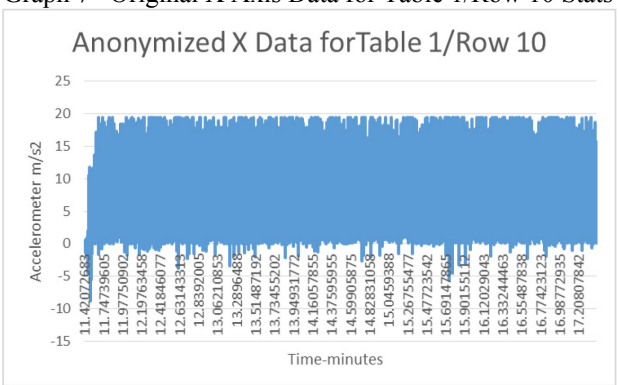


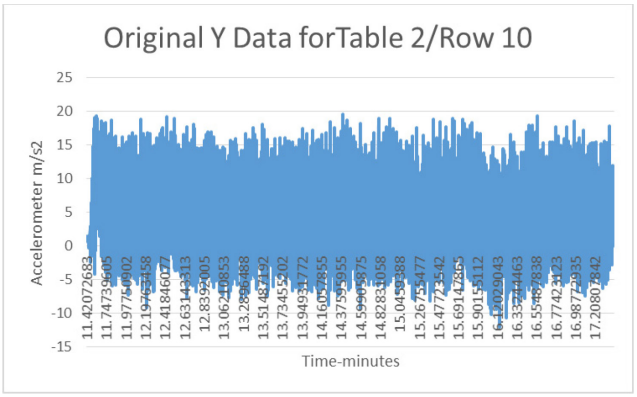
Fig. 9 – Histogram of Tab. 3/Row 2 Anon Z Axis Data



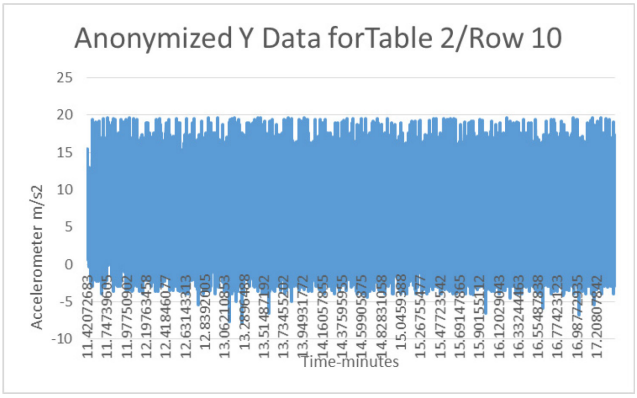
Graph 7 –Original X Axis Data for Table 1/Row 10 Stats



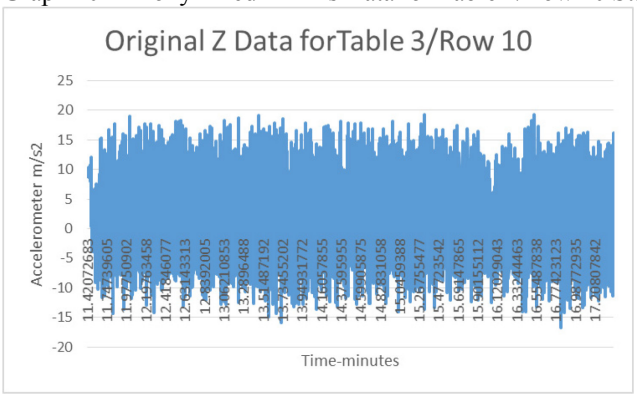
Graph 8 –Anonymized X Axis Data for Table 1/Row 10 Stats



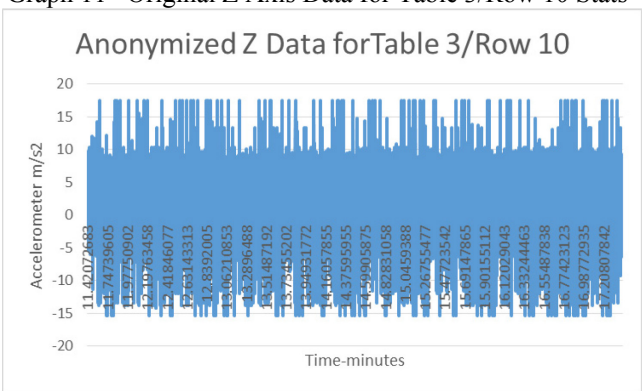
Graph 9 –Original Y Axis Data for Table 2/Row 10 Stats



Graph 10 –Anonymized Y Axis Data for Table 2/Row 10 Stats



Graph 11 –Original Z Axis Data for Table 3/Row 10 Stats



Graph 12 –Anonymized Z Axis Data for Table 3/Row 10 Stats

V. Conclusion

From the results, we have shown, with the implementation of the *SparCTym* algorithm in the Android operating system, that we were able to anonymize accelerometer walking data while maintaining the utility of the data. The entropy and mean of the original data significantly changed when the data were anonymized. Also, correlation between the original and anonymized Y and Z data was very small. Low correlation is an indication that, potentially, sensitive data has been obscured.

Using the *SparCTym* algorithm produces a cost of the loss of data points. However, as shown in Fig. 5, Fig. 7 and Fig. 9, a benefit in using this algorithm is that the anonymized data are smoother than that of the original data and lean toward a bell curve around the mean, i.e. normal distribution,.

The initial detection of walking activity by the applications on the Nexus S phone was slower than that of the Galaxy S7. However, once detected, subsequent activities registered in a reasonable amount of time.

The CPU (1 GHz single-core ARM Cortex-A8) on the Nexus S could be a factor as to why its initial recognition of an activity was slower than that of the Galaxy S7 (Smapdragon 820/Exynos 8890 with 4 GB of RAM).

References

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