Search for Displaced Leptons in √s = 13 TeV pp Collisions with the ATLAS Detector

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Search for Displaced Leptons in $\sqrt{s}=13$ TeV $pp$ Collisions with the ATLAS Detector

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A search for charged leptons with large impact parameters using 139 $fb^{-1}$ of $\sqrt{s} = 13$ TeV $pp$ collision data from the ATLAS detector at the LHC is presented, addressing a long-standing gap in coverage of possible new physics signatures. Results are consistent with the background prediction. This search provides unique sensitivity to long-lived scalar supersymmetric lepton partners (sleptons). For lifetimes of 0.1 ns, selectron, smuon, and stau masses up to 720, 680, and 340 GeV, respectively, are excluded at 95% confidence level, drastically improving on the previous best limits from LEP.

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Particles with long lifetimes are a feature of the standard model (SM) and many theories beyond the standard model (BSM) including $R$-parity-conserving supersymmetry (SUSY) [1–7] models like split SUSY [8,9] and gauge-mediated SUSY breaking (GMSB) [10–12], as well as $R$-parity-violating SUSY models [13,14] and exotic scenarios such as universal extra dimensions [15,16]. However, particle lifetime remains an underexplored parameter of phase space at the Large Hadron Collider (LHC), where detectors and searches for new physics were designed to measure the decay products of short-lived, heavy particles with the assumption that those decay products trace back to the collision point or very close to it [17–21]. BSM particles with lifetimes longer than a few picoseconds produce unconventional signatures, including displaced decay products that do not trace back to the interaction point. This brings technical challenges in almost all aspects of the search; consequently, some models with TeV-scale BSM particles in this lifetime regime remain unexplored. While many dedicated searches for BSM particles in this lifetime regime have been performed by the ATLAS [22–34] and CMS [35–46] Collaborations, signatures with displaced leptons with no visible decay vertex would not be identified by any previous ATLAS search. This Letter addresses that gap in coverage.

This signature brings unique sensitivity to GMSB SUSY models [47–49], where the nearly massless gravitino is the lightest SUSY particle (LSP), and the next-to-lightest SUSY particle (NLSP) becomes long-lived due to the small gravitational coupling to the LSP. Well-motivated versions of this model have a stau ($\tilde{\tau}$) as the single NLSP, or a selectron ($\tilde{e}$), smuon ($\tilde{\mu}$), and $\tilde{\tau}$ as co-NLSPs [50]. In these models, pair-produced sleptons ($\tilde{\ell}$) of the same flavor decay into an invisible gravitino and a charged lepton of the same flavor as the parent $\tilde{\ell}$. A combination of results from the LEP experiments excluded the superpartners of the right-handed muons and electrons ($\tilde{\mu}_R$ and $\tilde{e}_R$, respectively) of any lifetime for masses less than 96.3 and 65.8 GeV. The OPAL experiment alone set the best limits for all lifetimes of $\tilde{\tau}_1$, a mixture of the superpartners of the left- and right-handed $\tau$ leptons, and excluded masses less than 87.6 GeV [51–55]. A previous search from the CMS experiment [56] selected events with displaced, different-flavor leptons using 19.7 $fb^{-1}$ of 8 TeV data but did not directly target $\tilde{\ell}$ decays. A reinterpretation concluded that OPAL’s constraints remained the most stringent [50]. Additionally, Ref. [57] shows that targeting this signature could help improve the coverage of minimal supersymmetric models with a gravitino LSP. The present search provides mass sensitivity beyond the LEP limits.

To evaluate signal sensitivity, Monte Carlo (MC) events in a simplified GMSB SUSY model were simulated with up to two additional partons at leading order using MADGRAPH5_AMC@NLOv2.6.1 [58] with the NNPDF2.3lo parton distribution function (PDF) set [59] and interfaced to PYTHIA8.230 [60] using the A14 set of tuned parameters (tune) [61]. The sparticle decay was simulated using GEANT4 [62], which does not preserve information about the chirality of the $\tilde{\ell}$. The mixed states of the superpartners of the left- and right-handed $\tau$ leptons, $\tilde{\tau}_{1,2}$, were generated with mixing angle $\sin \theta_{\tilde{\tau}} = 0.95$. The impact of multiple interactions in the same and neighboring bunch crossings (pileup) was modeled by overlaying each hard-scattering event with simulated minimum-bias events generated with PYTHIA8.210 [60] using the A3 tune [63] and NNPDF2.3lo PDF set [59]. Signal cross sections were calculated at next-to-leading order in $\alpha_s$, with soft-gluon emission effects.
added at next-to-leading-logarithm accuracy [64–68]. The nominal cross section and uncertainty were taken from an 
evelope of predictions using different PDF sets and 
factorization and renormalization scales [69]. The sim-
plified model used for interpretation assumes the super-
partners of the left- and right-handed leptons are mass 
degenerate, yielding a cross section of 0.37 ± 0.01 pb for a 
single flavor of $\tilde{\ell}$ with mass 100 GeV and 0.059 ± 0.004 fb for a $\tilde{\ell}$ with mass 800 GeV. Simulated events 
were generated for $\tilde{e}/\tilde{\mu}$ ($\tilde{\tau}$) masses 50–900 GeV (50–400 GeV) and lifetimes 0.01–10 ns (0.1–1 ns).

This search uses 139 fb$^{-1}$ of data collected by the 
ATLAS experiment from $pp$ collisions at $\sqrt{s} = 13$ TeV. The ATLAS detector consists of concentric subdetectors 
used together to identify particles [70–73]. Data collection 
relies on a two-level trigger system, which uses tracking 
information from the inner detector (ID) along with 
information from the calorimeters and muon spectrometer 
(MS) to make fast, event-level decisions [74]. The typical 
lepton selection algorithms used in the trigger select 
particles coming from the primary interaction and cannot 
be used to select displaced leptons. Instead, triggers 
without tracking information are used: Electrons are 
identified using only their electromagnetic calorimeter 
(EM) signature via photon triggers, and muons are 
identified using MS information only. Single-photon 
and diphoton triggers select EM signatures with energy 
greater than 140 and 50 GeV, respectively, and the muon 
trigger selects MS signatures with transverse momentum 
($p_T$) greater than 60 GeV in the range $|\eta| < 1.05$. These 
triggers have an acceptance independent of lepton dis-
placement in the range probed by this search. The 
acceptance ranges from 1% to 80% for all flavors, 
increasing with $m_{\tilde{\ell}}$ mass, and is lower for $\tilde{\tau}$ than $\tilde{\ell}$ or $\tilde{\mu}$ 
due to the smaller $p_T$ of the final-state leptons.

After the trigger stage, more complex tracking algo-
rithms are possible, and tracks can be used more exten-
sively for particle identification. Displaced leptons are 
identified as those with large transverse impact parameter 
($d_0$), the distance of closest approach of the particle’s track 
to the interaction point in the $x$–$y$ plane. The $|d_0|$ is 
measured relative to the vertex with the highest $\Sigma p_T^2$ 
of associated tracks. Tracks are reconstructed by fitting a 
series of ID hits to identify those consistent with a particle’s 
trajectory. For this search, tracking is performed in two 
stages: First, standard tracking reconstructs tracks with 
$|d_0| < 10$ mm [75], and then an additional reconstruction 
step uses hits not matched to tracks in the previous stage, 
adding tracks with $|d_0| < 300$ mm [76]. The extended track 
collection is combined with EM energy clusters to recon-
struct electrons or with tracks composed of segments 
measured in the MS to reconstruct muons, both in the 
range $|\eta| < 2.5$. Standard lepton identification algorithms 
[77–79] are modified by removing requirements on $|d_0|$ and 
the number of hits matched to the track. Figure 1 shows the 
final reconstruction efficiency for displaced electrons 
and muons.

Signal leptons must have high transverse momentum, 
$p_T > 65$ GeV, and large transverse impact parameter, 
$3$ mm $< |d_0| < 300$ mm, to remove SM backgrounds. To 
reduce the background from out-of-time cosmic-ray 
muons, a requirement is placed on the MS timing relative 
to when a standard model particle is expected to arrive in 
the detector ($t_0$). The average time measured by the muon’s 
MS track segments, $t_0^{\text{avg}}$, must have an absolute value less 
than 30 ns. In order to reduce the contribution from leptons 
from decays of heavy-flavor hadrons, signal leptons are 
required to be isolated from nearby activity in the ID and 
calorimeters. The sum of the $p_T$ of all tracks near an 
electron (muon) must be less than 6% (4%) of the lepton
The number of background events remaining after signal selections is estimated from data while keeping the signal regions blinded. In SR-ee and SR-emu, the dominant background comes from fake leptons, with a smaller contribution from leptons from heavy-flavor hadron decays. Zero events with a cosmic-tagged muon and electron were observed; therefore, the background contribution from untagged cosmic-ray muons in SR-emu is expected to be negligible. Fake electrons typically result from the mismatching of a track to a photon. Fake muons result from the mismatching of an ID track to an MS track and are comparatively rare, since there is less activity and better pointing information in the MS than in the calorimeter. Fake leptons tend to fail quality criteria; as a result, they have poor $\chi^2$ or inconsistent track and lepton $p_T$. Moreover, these requirements also remove heavy-flavor contributions which tend to have extra energy in their clusters compared to their tracks. As a result, the contribution of these backgrounds is estimated together. The quality criteria in this analysis are uncorrelated between the two leptons in an event, which has been verified in inverted regions in data. Since the variables are uncorrelated, they can be used to estimate the background contribution to the signal regions. The background is estimated with an ABCD method [80] by calculating the ratio of the number of events where lepton 1 passes inverted quality criteria (not including lepton 1 or $|d_0|$) and lepton 2 passes nominal requirements, and vice versa, divided by the number of events where both leptons fail the quality criteria. To estimate the background in SR-ee, where the two leading leptons are electrons, lepton 1 is the leading electron, and lepton 2 is the subleading electron. To estimate the background in SR-emu, where the two leading leptons are an electron and a muon, leptons 1 and 2 are the leading electron and muon, respectively. The same algorithm is used for SR-ee and SR-emu, but, due to statistical limitations in SR-emu, the $p_T$ and $|d_0|$ requirements on the leptons are relaxed to $p_T > 50$ GeV and $|d_0| > 2$ mm. As the $p_T$ and $|d_0|$ distributions are exponentially falling, this results in a conservative background estimate in SR-emu.

In the ABCD method, the phase space is split into four regions: region $A$, region $B$, region $C$, and region $D$. Region $A$ is the signal region, where all requirements are satisfied, region $B$ is the region where lepton 1 fails quality criteria but lepton 2 passes all lepton requirements, region $C$ is the region where lepton 2 fails quality criteria but lepton 1 passes all requirements, and region $D$ is the region where both leptons fail quality criteria. For an electron, the inverted quality criteria are ID track $\chi^2/n_{d.o.f.} > 2$, $(p_T^{\text{track}} - p_T^e)/p_T^e < -0.5$, and greater than one missing hit after the electron’s innermost hit. For a muon, the inverted quality criteria are ID track $\chi^2/n_{d.o.f.} > 2$, combined MS and ID track $\chi^2/n_{d.o.f.} > 3$, measurements in less than three precision tracking layers of the MS, greater than one missing hit after the muon’s innermost hit, and no high-precision $\phi$ measurement. The number of events in the signal region is then estimated by the following calculation:

$$N_A^{\text{predicted}} = \frac{N_B \times N_C}{N_D},$$

where $N_A^{\text{predicted}}$ is the predicted number of background events in the signal region (region $A$), $N_B$ is the number of events in region $B$, $N_C$ is the number of events in region $C$, and $N_D$ is the number of events in region $D$. 

$|\eta_{\mu} + \eta_{\text{MS segment}}| < 0.018$ and $|\phi_{\mu} - \phi_{\text{MS segment}} - \pi| < 0.25$, the muon is cosmic tagged. This algorithm has a cosmic rejection efficiency of $> 99\%$. 

The number of background events remaining after signal selections is estimated from data while keeping the signal regions blinded. In SR-ee and SR-emu, the dominant background comes from fake leptons, with a smaller contribution from leptons from heavy-flavor hadron decays. Zero events with a cosmic-tagged muon and electron were observed; therefore, the background contribution from untagged cosmic-ray muons in SR-emu is expected to be negligible. Fake electrons typically result from the mismatching of a track to a photon. Fake muons result from the mismatching of an ID track to an MS track and are comparatively rare, since there is less activity and better pointing information in the MS than in the calorimeter. Fake leptons tend to fail quality criteria; as a result, they have poor $\chi^2$ or inconsistent track and lepton $p_T$. Moreover, these requirements also remove heavy-flavor contributions which tend to have extra energy in their clusters compared to their tracks. As a result, the contribution of these backgrounds is estimated together. The quality criteria in this analysis are uncorrelated between the two leptons in an event, which has been verified in inverted regions in data. Since the variables are uncorrelated, they can be used to estimate the background contribution to the signal regions. The background is estimated with an ABCD method [80] by calculating the ratio of the number of events where lepton 1 passes inverted quality criteria (not including lepton 1 or $|d_0|$) and lepton 2 passes nominal requirements, and vice versa, divided by the number of events where both leptons fail the quality criteria. To estimate the background in SR-ee, where the two leading leptons are electrons, lepton 1 is the leading electron, and lepton 2 is the subleading electron. To estimate the background in SR-emu, where the two leading leptons are an electron and a muon, leptons 1 and 2 are the leading electron and muon, respectively. The same algorithm is used for SR-ee and SR-emu, but, due to statistical limitations in SR-emu, the $p_T$ and $|d_0|$ requirements on the leptons are relaxed to $p_T > 50$ GeV and $|d_0| > 2$ mm. As the $p_T$ and $|d_0|$ distributions are exponentially falling, this results in a conservative background estimate in SR-emu.
Validations of these background estimates are performed, with the heavy-flavor and fake contributions targeted separately. The validation of the heavy-flavor contribution is achieved using the same method as the nominal background estimation but inverting the isolation requirement in all regions. To increase statistics, the requirement on \((p_T^{\text{track}} - p_T^{\ell})/p_T^{\ell}\) is loosened to be greater than \(-0.9\) instead of \(-0.5\), as this distribution exponentially decreases from \(-1\) to \(-0.5\). The fake-lepton contribution is probed by inverting the most powerful fake discriminators by requiring the electron variable \((p_T^{\text{track}} - p_T^{\ell})/p_T^{\ell}\) to be less than \(-0.5\) and the muon’s combined track’s \(\chi^2/n_{\text{d.o.f.}}\) to be greater than 3 and performing the ABCD estimate with the remaining quality criteria. The validation of both estimates is shown in Table I. Even with the loosened requirements of \(p_T > 50\) GeV and \(|d_0| > 2\) mm in VR-ee-fake and VR-ee-heavy-flavor and \((p_T^{\text{track}} - p_T^{\ell})/p_T^{\ell} > -0.9\) in VR-ee-heavy-flavor, the statistics in these validation regions are limited. The background is so small since fake muons are rare, and the requirements on \(p_T\) and \(|d_0|\) on signal leptons render heavy-flavor backgrounds negligible. Nonetheless, the numbers of estimated and observed events were consistent within statistical uncertainties, and uncertainties were assigned to account for small differences between predictions and observations in each validation. The predicted number of background events from fake and heavy-flavor decay leptons is \(0.46 \pm 0.10\) in SR-ee and \(0.007^{+0.019}_{-0.007}\) in SR-ee-\(b\), including all uncertainties.

The dominant background in SR-\(\mu\) comes from mis-measured reconstructed muons from cosmic rays. The fake lepton background is found to be negligible due to the rarity of fake muons. The heavy-flavor background is estimated using an ABCD estimate extrapolating from nonisolated muons to isolated muons with loosened \(p_T\) and \(|d_0|\) requirements to increase statistics \((p_T > 50\) GeV and subleading muon \(|d_0| > 0.5\) mm). This results in a heavy-flavor estimate of \(< 10^{-4}\) events. For a cosmic event to be a background to this search, both \(\mu_t\) and \(\mu_b\) must be reconstructed in the same event, which means their \(p_T^{\text{track}}\) will be near the edges of the allowed range and are likely to have their MS hits associated with the wrong event. This results in reconstructed muons with good quality ID tracks, but poor quality MS signatures, which could present challenges in cosmic tagging one or both muons. An event with a cosmic-ray muon could meet signal region requirements if both muons have missing MS hits and neither is tagged. Cosmic-tagging failures occur not when the muon in question is mismeasured, but when the muon is in the half of the detector opposite to a poorly reconstructed MS track, and no MS segments are found in the tag window. The estimate of this background relies on the assumption that the quality of a muon and its probability to be cosmic tagged are uncorrelated.

All events considered in this estimate have \(\mu_t\) passing all signal requirements, while \(\mu_t\) is either cosmic tagged, fails to satisfy some of the quality criteria, or both. No dimuon events were observed with two muons on the same side of the detector. In events where \(\mu_t\) is cosmic tagged, the ratio of \(\mu_t\) which satisfy the quality criteria to those that do not, \(R_\text{good}\), is measured. This ratio is multiplied by the number of events in which \(\mu_t\) is not cosmic tagged but fails to satisfy at least one of the quality criteria, to estimate the background in SR-\(\mu\mu\). The estimate is validated by redefining the cosmic-tag window to leave more muons untagged, providing a larger sample for studying \(R_\text{good}\). An additional uncertainty is assigned to the background estimate from the validation to account for the \(|d_0|\) dependence of \(R_\text{good}\), which cannot be directly constrained in the nominal estimate due to statistical limitations. Additional validations test other assumptions by varying the quality criteria and reversing the roles of \(\mu_b\) and \(\mu_t\) in the definition of \(R_\text{good}\). Including all uncertainties, \(0.11^{+0.20}_{-0.11}\) events are predicted in SR-\(\mu\mu\).

Signal systematic uncertainties are evaluated to quantify differences between data and simulation and correct the MC events where possible. Differences in signal lepton selection efficiency cannot be compared between data and MC simulation due to the lack of displaced leptons in data, so a conservative systematic uncertainty is derived in three steps. First, trigger, reconstruction, and selection efficiencies are measured for low-\(|d_0|\) leptons resulting from Z boson decays, for which data and simulation can be compared. Scale factors are derived to correct the simulation to match the data. Uncertainties in these scale factors are statistical and less than 5%. Next, the high-\(|d_0|\) tracking efficiency is compared between signal simulation and data with cosmic-tagged muons. After corrections to account for the different physical processes, the tracking efficiency as a function of displacement is compared, and an 8% uncertainty is assigned to each lepton. Finally, the \(|d_0|\) dependence of the lepton reconstruction and selection efficiency is compared with the \(|d_0|\) dependence of the tracking efficiency in simulation only. The variation of the selection efficiency as a function of \(|d_0|\) is taken as an uncertainty to
account for any discrepancies that cannot be studied in data. This uncertainty increases with displacement and is 0.5%–5% (3%–27%) for muons (electrons). It is larger for electrons due to identification challenges introduced by the ambiguity in the detector signatures of electrons, photons, and converted photons. Theoretical uncertainties include cross section uncertainties of 2%–6% and effects of varying the factorization and renormalization scales < 5%. Other uncertainties, including the impact of pileup on signal selection, luminosity uncertainty [81,82], and uncertainty from the filtering selection used for the extended track reconstruction, contribute at < 2%.

Zero events are observed in each of the three signal regions, consistent with the background predictions shown in Table II. As no excess of events is observed, exclusion limits on long-lived selectrons and smuons for various SUSY models with a NLSP, while NLSP and co-NLSP scenarios are treated as correlated across the orthogonal regions. Limits on long-lived selectron production are presented in Fig. 2, where expected and observed exclusion contours as a function of the slepton mass at 95% C.L. for various SUSY models with a NLSP, while NLSP and co-NLSP scenarios are treated as correlated across the orthogonal regions.

Lifetimes of 0.1 ns. This result probes GMSB selectron production for the first time in this lifetime range at the electroweak scale and approaching the TeV scale. Furthermore, as no requirements were made on missing energy, displaced vertices, or jets, this result is model independent and applicable to any BSM model producing high-\( p_T \) displaced leptons.

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[70] ATLAS uses a right-handed coordinate system with its origin at the nominal interaction point (IP) in the center of the detector and the $z$ axis along the beam pipe. The $x$ axis points from the IP to the center of the LHC ring, and the $y$ axis points upward. Cylindrical coordinates ($r, \phi$) are used in the transverse plane, $\phi$ being the azimuthal angle around the $z$ axis. The pseudorapidity is defined in terms of the polar angle $\theta$ as $\eta = -\ln \tan(\theta/2)$.
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