# Understanding user namespaces

Michael Kerrisk, man7.org © 2019

mtk@man7.org

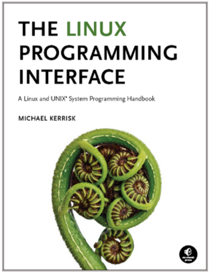
25 October 2019, Munich

# Outline

# Outline

# Who am I?

- Maintainer of Linux *man-pages* project since 2004
  - ≈1050 pages, mainly for system calls & C library functions
    - https://www.kernel.org/doc/man-pages/
    - (I wrote a lot of those pages...)
- Author of a book on the Linux programming interface
  - http://man7.org/tlpi/
- **Trainer**/writer/engineer
  `http://man7.org/training/`
- Email: `mtk@man7.org`
  Twitter: `@mkerrisk`




man7.org

# Time is short

- Normally, I would spend several hours on this topic
- Many details left out, but I hope to give an idea of big picture
- We'll go fast

# Outline

# (Traditional) superuser and set-UID-*root* programs

- Traditional UNIX privilege model divides users into two groups:
  - **Normal users**, subject to privilege checking based on UIDs and GIDs
  - **Superuser** (UID 0) bypasses many of those checks
- Traditional mechanism for giving privilege to unprivileged users is **set-UID-*root* program**

```
# chown root prog
# chmod u+s prog
```

  - When executed, **process assumes UID of file owner**
    - ⇒ process gains privileges of superuser
  - Powerful, but dangerous

man7.org

# The traditional privilege model is a problem

- Coarse granularity of traditional privilege model is a problem:
  - E.g., say we want to give a program the power to change system time
    - Must also give it power to do **everything else** *root* can do
  - ⇒ **No limit on possible damage** if program is compromised
- **Capabilities** are an attempt to solve this problem

# Background: capabilities

- Capabilities: divide power of superuser into small pieces
  - 38 capabilities as at Linux 5.4 (see *capabilities(7)*)
  - Examples:
    - `CAP_DAC_OVERRIDE`: bypass all file permission checks
    - `CAP_SYS_ADMIN`: do (too) many different sysadmin operations
    - `CAP_SYS_TIME`: change system time
- Instead of set-UID-*root* programs, have programs with one/a few attached capabilities
  - Attached using *setcap(8)* (needs `CAP_SETFCAP` capability!)
  - When program is executed ⇒ process gets those capabilities
  - Program is **weaker** than set-UID-*root* program
    - ⇒ **less dangerous if compromised**

man7.org

# Background: capabilities

- **Summary**:
  - Processes can have capabilities (**subset** of power of *root*)
  - Files can have attached capabilities, which are given to process that executes program
  - Privileged binaries/processes using capabilities are less dangerous if compromised

# Outline

# Namespaces

- A namespace (NS) "wraps" some global system resource to provide resource isolation
- Linux supports multiple NS types
    - Seven currently, and counting...

# Each NS isolates some kind of resource(s)

- **Mount** NS: isolate mount point list
  - (CLONE_NEWNS; 2.4.19, 2002)
- **UTS** NS: isolate system identifiers (e.g., hostname)
  - (CLONE_NEWUTS; 2.6.19, 2006)
- **IPC** NS: isolate System V IPC and POSIX MQ objects
  - (CLONE_NEWIPC; 2.6.19, 2006)
- **PID** NS: isolate PID number space
  - (CLONE_NEWPID; 2.6.24, 2008)
- **Network** NS: isolate NW resources (firewall & routing rules, socket port numbers, /proc/net, /sys/class/net, ...)
  - (CLONE_NEWNET; ≈2.6.29, 2009)

# Each NS isolates some kind of resource(s)

- **User** NS: isolate user ID and group ID number spaces
  - (CLONE_NEWUSER; **3.8, 2013**)
- **Cgroup** NS: virtualize (isolate) certain cgroup pathnames
  - (CLONE_NEWCGROUP; 4.6, 2016)

# Namespaces

- For each NS type:
  - Multiple **instances** of NS may exist on a system
  - At system boot, there is one instance of each NS type–the **initial namespace**
  - A process resides in one NS instance (of each of NS types)
  - To processes inside NS instance, it appears that only they can see/modify corresponding global resource
    - (They are unaware of other instances of resource)

man7.org

# Outline

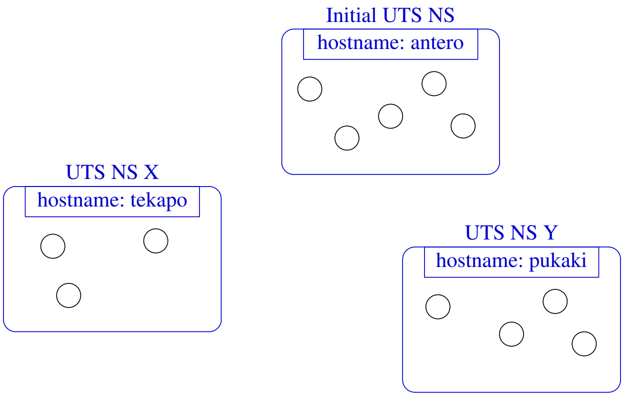
# UTS namespaces (`CLONE_NEWUTS`)

- UTS NSs are simplest NS, and so provide an easy example
- Isolate two system identifiers returned by *uname(2)*
    - *nodename*: system hostname (set by *sethostname(2)*)
    - *domainname*: NIS domain name (set by *setdomainname(2)*)
- Container configuration scripts might tailor their actions based on these IDs
    - E.g., nodename could be used with DHCP, to obtain IP address for container
- "UTS" comes from *struct utsname* argument of *uname(2)*
    - Structure name derives from "UNIX Timesharing System"

# UTS namespaces (CLONE_NEWUTS)

- Running system may have multiple UTS NS instances
- Processes within single instance access (get/set) same *nodename* and *domainname*
- Each NS instance has its own *nodename* and *domainname*
  - Changes to *nodename* and *domainname* in one NS instance are invisible to other instances

# UTS namespace instances




Each UTS NS contains a set of processes (the circles) which see/modify same hostname (and domain name, not shown)

# Outline

# Some "magic" symlinks

- Each process has some symlink files in `/proc/PID/ns`

```
/proc/PID/ns/cgroup      # Cgroup NS instance
/proc/PID/ns/ipc         # IPC NS instance
/proc/PID/ns/mnt         # Mount NS instance
/proc/PID/ns/net         # Network NS instance
/proc/PID/ns/pid         # PID NS instance
/proc/PID/ns/user        # User NS instance
/proc/PID/ns/uts         # UTS NS instance
```

  - One symlink for each of the NS types

# Some “magic” symlinks

- Target of symlink tells us which NS instance process is in:

```
$ readlink /proc/$$/ns/uts
uts:[4026531838]
```

  - Content has form: *ns-type* : [*magic-inode-#*]
- Various uses for the `/proc/PID/ns` symlinks, including:
  - **If processes show same symlink target, they are in same NS**

# APIs and commands

- Programs can use various system calls to work with NSs:
  - *clone(2)*: create new (child) process in new NS(s)
  - *unshare(2)*: create new NS(s) and move caller into it/them
  - *setns(2)*: move calling process to another (existing) NS instance
- There are analogous **shell commands**:
  - *unshare(1)*: create new NS(s) and execute a command in the NS(s)
  - *nsenter(1)*: enter existing NS(s) and execute a command

# The *unshare(1)* and *nsenter(1)* commands

*unshare(1)* and *nsenter(1)* have flags for specifying each NS type:

```
unshare [options] [command [arguments]]
  -C       Create new cgroup NS
  -i       Create new IPC NS
  -m       Create new mount NS
  -n       Create new network NS
  -p       Create new PID NS
  -u       Create new UTS NS
  -U       Create new user NS
```

```
nsenter [options] [command [arguments]]
  -t PID  PID of process whose NSs should be entered
  -C      Enter cgroup NS of target process
  -i      Enter IPC NS of target process
  -m      Enter mount NS of target process
  -n      Enter network NS of target process
  -p      Enter PID NS of target process
  -u      Enter UTS NS of target process
  -U      Enter user NS of target process
  -a      Enter all NSs of target process
```

# Privilege requirements for creating namespaces

- Creating **user** NS instances requires no privileges
- Creating instances of **other** (nonuser) NS types requires privilege
  - `CAP_SYS_ADMIN`

man7.org

# Demo

- Two terminal windows (*sh1*, *sh2*) in initial UTS NS

```
sh1$ hostname        # Show hostname in initial UTS NS
antero
```

- In *sh2*, create new UTS NS, and change hostname

```
sh2$ hostname        # Show hostname in initial UTS NS
antero
$ PS1='sh2# ' sudo unshare -u bash
sh2# hostname bizarro  # Change hostname
sh2# hostname          # Verify change
bizarro
```

  - Used *sudo* because we need privilege (`CAP_SYS_ADMIN`) to create a UTS NS

man7.org

# Demo

- In *sh1*, verify that hostname is unchanged:

```
sh1$ hostname
antero
```

- Compare /proc/PID/ns/uts symlinks in two shells

```
sh1$ readlink /proc/$$/ns/uts
uts:[4026531838]
```

```
sh2# readlink /proc/$$/ns/uts
uts:[4026532855]
```

  - The two shells are in different UTS NSs

# Demo

- From *sh1*, use *nsenter(1)* to create a new shell that is in same NS as *sh2*:

```
sh2# echo $$        # Discover PID of sh2
5912
```

```
sh1$ PS1='sh3# ' sudo nsenter -t 5912 -u
sh3# hostname
bizarro
sh3# readlink /proc/$$/ns/uts
uts:[4026532855]
```

  - Comparing the symlink values, we can see that this shell (`sh3#`) is in the second (`sh2#`) UTS NS

# Outline

# What do user namespaces do?

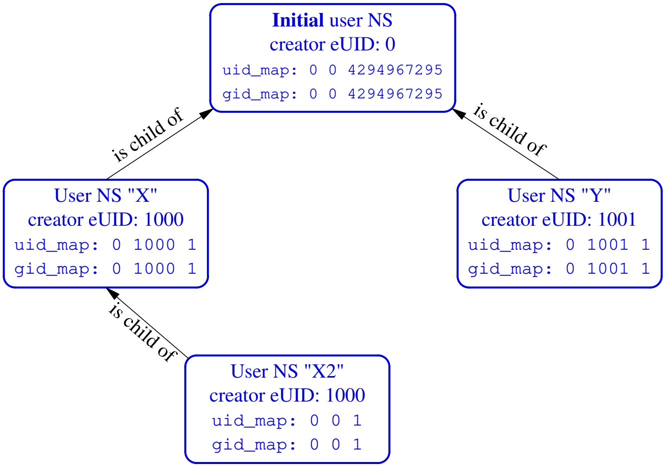
- Allow per-namespace **mappings** of UIDs and GIDs
  - I.e., process's UIDs and GIDs inside NS may be different from IDs outside NS
- Interesting use case: process may have nonzero UID outside NS, and UID of 0 inside NS
  - Process has ***root*** **privileges** ***for operations inside user NS***
    - Understanding what that means is our goal...

man7.org

# Relationships between user namespaces

- User NSs have a **hierarchical relationship**:
- **Parent of a user NS** == user NS of process that created this user NS
  - Using *clone(2)*, *unshare(2)*, or *unshare(1)*
- Parental relationship determines some rules about how capabilities work
  - (End slides)

# A user namespace hierarchy



# The first process in a new user NS has *root* privileges

- When a new user NS is created (*unshare(1)*, *clone(2)*, *unshare(2)*), first process in NS has **all** capabilities
- That process has power of superuser!
- ... but only inside the user NS

man7.org

# Outline

# UID and GID mappings

- One of first steps after creating a user NS is to define **UID and GID mappings** for NS
- Defined by writing to 2 files: `/proc/PID/uid_map` and `/proc/PID/gid_map`
- For security reasons, there are **many** rules + restrictions on:
  - How/when files may be updated
  - Who can update the files
  - Way too many details to cover here...
    - See *user_namespaces(7)*

# UID and GID mappings

- Records written to/read from `uid_map` and `gid_map` have the form:

```
ID-inside-ns    ID-outside-ns    length
```

  - *ID-inside-ns* and *length* define range of IDs inside user NS that are to be mapped
  - *ID-outside-ns* defines start of corresponding mapped range in "outside" user NS

- Commonly these files are initialized with a single line containing "root mapping":

```
0     1000     1
```

  - One ID, 0, inside NS maps to ID 1000 in outer NS

# Example: creating a user NS with "root" mappings

- unshare -U -r creates user NS with root mappings
- Create a user NS with root mappings running new shell, and examine map files:

```
$ id                # Show credentials in current shell
uid=1000(mtk) gid=1000(mtk) ...

$ PS1='uns2$ ' unshare -U -r bash
uns2$ cat /proc/$$/uid_map
         0       1000          1
uns2$ cat /proc/$$/gid_map
         0       1000          1
```

man7.org

# Example: creating a user NS with "root" mappings

- Examine credentials and capabilities of new shell:

```
uns2$ id
uid=0(root) gid=0(root) groups=0(root) ...
uns2$ egrep '[UG]id|CapEff' /proc/$$/status
Uid:  0 0 0 0
Gid:  0 0 0 0
CapEff: 0000003fffffffff          # Hex bit mask
```

  - `0x3fffffffff` is bit mask with all 38 capability bits set
    - *getpcaps* from *libcap* project gives same info more readably

# Example: creating a user NS with "root" mappings

- Discover PID of shell in new user NS:

```
uns2$ echo $$
21135
```

- From a shell in **initial user NS**, examine credentials of that PID:

```
$ grep '[UG]id' /proc/21135/status
Uid:   1000   1000   1000   1000
Gid:   1000   1000   1000   1000
```

# I'm superuser! (But, you're a big fish in a little pond)

- From the shell in new user NS, let's try to change the hostname
  - Requires CAP_SYS_ADMIN

```
uns2$ hostname bizarro
hostname: you must be root to change the host name
```

- Shell is UID 0 (superuser) and has CAP_SYS_ADMIN
- What went wrong?
- The new shell is in new user NS, but **still resides in initial UTS NS**
  - (Remember: hostname is isolated/governed by UTS NS)
  - Let's look at this more closely...

# Outline

# User namespaces and capabilities

- Kernel grants **all** capabilities to initial process in new user NS of capabilities
- But, those capabilities are available **only for operations on objects governed by the new user NS**
  - But what does that mean?

# User namespaces and capabilities

- We've already seen that:
  - There are a number of NS types
  - Each NS type governs some global resource(s); e.g.:
    - UTS: hostname, NIS domain name
    - Mount: set of mount points
    - Network: IP routing tables, port numbers, `/proc/net`, ...
- Adding to this: **each nonuser NS instance is owned by some user NS instance**
  - When creating new nonuser NS, kernel marks that NS as owned by **user NS of process creating the new NS**
- If a process operates on resources governed by nonuser NS:
  - Permission checks are done according to that **process's capabilities in user NS that owns the nonuser NS**

# User namespaces and capabilities

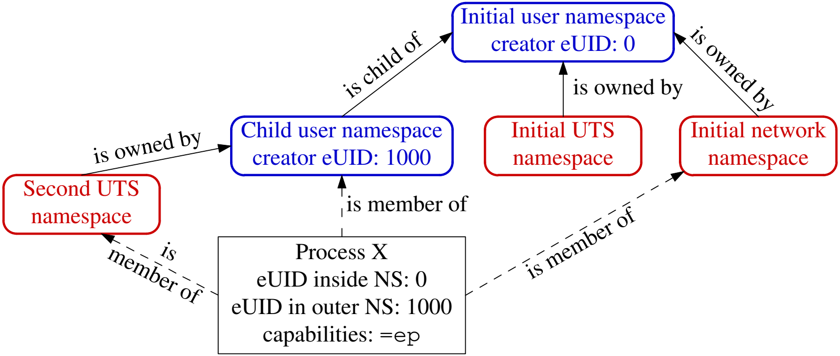
- To illustrate, let's look at set-up resulting from command:

```
unshare -Ur -u <prog>
```

(Create process running *prog* in new user NS
with root mappings + new UTS NS)

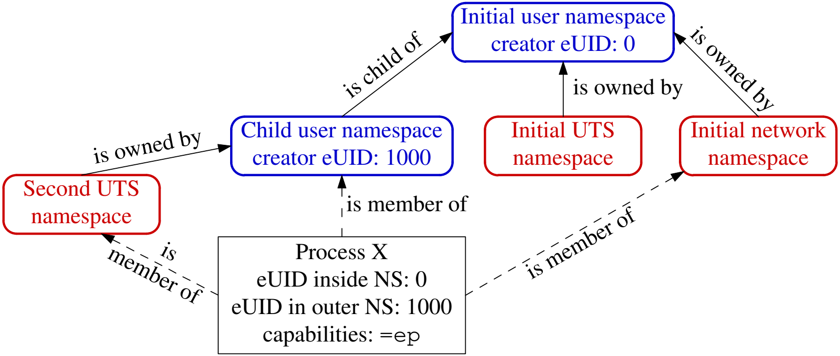
man7.org

# User namespaces and capabilities—an example



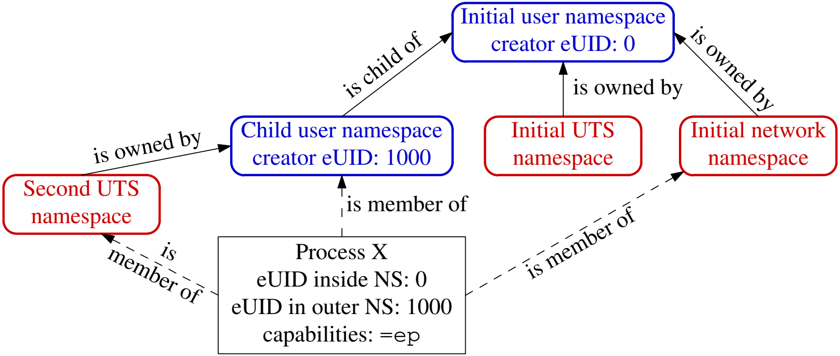

- Example scenario; **X was created with:** `unshare -Ur -u <prog>`
  - X is in new user NS, with root mappings, and has all capabilities
  - X is in a new UTS NS, which is owned by new user NS
  - X is in initial instance of all other NS types (e.g., network NS)

# User namespaces and capabilities–an example




- Suppose X tries to change hostname (`CAP_SYS_ADMIN`)
- X is in second **UTS** NS
- Permissions checked according to X's capabilities in user NS that owns that UTS NS ⇒ succeeds (X has capabilities in that user NS)

# User namespaces and capabilities—an example




- Suppose X tries to bind to reserved socket port (`CAP_NET_BIND_SERVICE`)
- X is in initial **network** NS
- Permissions checked according to X's capabilities in user NS that owns network NS ⇒ attempt fails (no capabilities in initial user NS)

man7.org

# Discovering namespace relationships

- There are APIs to discover parental relationships between user NSs and ownership relationships between user NSs and nonuser NSs
  - See *ioctl_ns(2)*,
    http://blog.man7.org/2016/12/introspecting-namespace-relationships.html
  - Code example: `namespaces/namespaces_of.go`
    - Shows namespace memberships of specified processes, in context of user NS hierarchy

man7.org

# Discovering namespace relationships

- Commands to replicate scenario shown in previous slides:

```
$ echo $$              # PID of a shell in initial user NS
327
$ unshare -Ur -u sh # Create new user and UTS NSs
# echo $$              # PID of shell in new NSs
353
```

- Inspect with `namespaces/namespaces_of.go` program:

```
$ go run namespaces_of.go --namespaces=net,uts 327 353
user {3 4026531837} <UID: 0>
        [ 327 ]
    net {3 4026532008}
            [ 327 353 ]
    uts {3 4026531838}
            [ 327 ]
    user {3 4026532760} <UID: 1000>
            [ 353 ]
        uts {3 4026532761}
                [ 353 ]
```

  - Shells are in same network NS, but different UTS+user NSs
  - Second UTS NS is owned by second user NS

# Outline

# User namespaces permit novel applications

- User NSs permit novel applications; for example:
  - Running Linux containers **without** *root* privileges
    - Docker, LXC
  - Chrome-style sandboxes without set-UID-*root* helpers
    - Set-UID-*root* helpers are (were) used to set up sandbox
    - https://chromium.googlesource.com/chromium/src/+/master/docs/design/sandbox.md
  - User namespace with single UID identity mapping ⇒ no superuser possible!
    - E.g., `uid_map:  1000 1000 1`

man7.org

# User namespaces permit novel applications

- User NSs permit novel applications; more examples:
  - *chroot()*-based applications for process isolation
    - User NSs allow unprivileged process to create new mount NSs and use *chroot()*
  - *fakeroot*-type applications without `LD_PRELOAD`/dynamic linking tricks
    - (*http://fakeroot.alioth.debian.org/*)

man7.org

# User namespaces permit novel applications

- User NSs permit novel applications; more examples:
  - Firejail: namespaces + seccomp + capabilities for generalized, **simplified** sandboxing of any application
    - https://firejail.wordpress.com/, https://lwn.net/Articles/671534/
  - Flatpak: namespaces + seccomp + capabilities + cgroups for application packaging / sandboxing
    - Allows upstream project to provide packaged app with all necessary runtime dependencies
      - No need to rely on packaging in downstream distributions
      - Package once; run on any distribution
    - Desktop applications run seamlessly in GUI
    - http://flatpak.org/, https://lwn.net/Articles/694291/

man7.org

# Namespaces: sources of further information

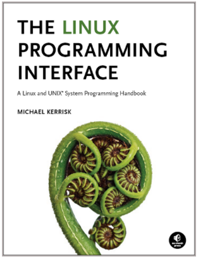
- My LWN.net article series *Namespaces in operation*
  - https://lwn.net/Articles/531114/
  - Many example programs and shell sessions...
- Man pages:
  - *namespaces(7)*, *user_namespaces(7)*, *mount_namespaces(7)*, *pid_namespaces(7)*, etc.
  - *unshare(1)*, *nsenter(1)*
  - *capabilities(7)*
  - *clone(2)*, *unshare(2)*, *setns(2)*, *ioctl_ns(2)*
- "Linux containers in 500 lines of code"
  - https://blog.lizzie.io/linux-containers-in-500-loc.html

# Thanks!

Michael Kerrisk, Trainer and Consultant
http://man7.org/training/

mtk@man7.org @mkerrisk

Slides at http://man7.org/conf/
Source code at http://man7.org/tlpi/code/



# Outline

# Combining user namespaces and other namespace types

- Earlier, we noted that CAP_SYS_ADMIN is needed to create nonuser NSs
- So, why can unprivileged user do this:

```
$ unshare -U -u -r bash
```

- Can do this, because kernel first creates user NS, giving child all privileges, so that UTS NS can also be created
- Equivalent to following, but without intervening child process:

```
$ unshare -U -r bash   # Child in new user NS
$ unshare -u bash      # Grandchild in new UTS NS
```

man7.org

# What about resources not governed by namespaces?

- Some privileged operations relate to resources/features not (yet) governed by any namespace
  - E.g., system time, kernel modules
- Having all capabilities in a (noninitial) user NS doesn't grant power to perform operations on features not currently governed by any NS
  - E.g., can't change system time or load/unload kernel modules

# But what about accessing files (and other resources)?

- Suppose UID 1000 is mapped to UID 0 inside a user NS
- What happens when process with UID 0 inside user NS tries to access file owned by ("true") UID 0?
- When accessing files, IDs are mapped back to values in initial user NS
  - There is a chain of user NSs starting at NS of process and going back to initial NS
  - Examining the mappings in this chain allows kernel to know "true" UID and GID of processes in user NSs
  - Same principle for checks on other resources that have UID+GID owner
    - E.g., Various IPC objects

# Outline

What are the rules that determine the capabilities that a process has in a given user namespace?

# User namespace hierarchies

- User NSs exist in a hierarchy
  - Each user NS has a parent, going back to initial user NS
- Parental relationship is established when user NS is created:
  - Parent of a new user NS is user NS of process that created new user NS
- Parental relationship is significant because it plays a part in determining capabilities a process has in user NS

# User namespaces and capabilities

- Whether a process has a capability inside a user NS depends on several factors:
  - Whether the capability is present in the process's (effective) capability set
  - Which user NS the process is a member of
  - The (effective) process's UID
  - The (effective) UID of the process that created the user NS
    - At creation time, **kernel records eUID of creator** as "owner UID" of user NS
  - The parental relationship between user NSs
  - (`namespaces/ns_capable.c` program encapsulates the rules shown on next slide–it answers the question, does process P have capabilities in namespace X?)

# Capability rules for user namespaces

1. A process has a capability in a user NS if:
   - it is a **member of the user NS**, and
   - **capability is present in its effective set**
   - **Note**: this rule doesn't grant that capability in **parent** NS
2. A process that has a capability in a user NS **has the capability in all descendant user NSs** as well
   - I.e., members of user NS are not isolated from effects of privileged process in parent/ancestor user NS
3. (All) processes in **parent** user NS that have **same eUID** as eUID of creator of user NS have all capabilities in the NS
   - At creation time, **kernel records eUID of creator** as "owner UID" of user NS
   - By virtue of previous rule, capabilities also propagate into all descendant user NSs

# Outline

# User namespaces are hard (even for kernel developers)

- Developer(s) of user NSs put much effort into ensuring capabilities couldn't leak from inner user NS to outside NS
  - Potential risk: some piece of kernel code might not be refactored to account for distinct user NSs
  - $\Rightarrow$ unprivileged user who gains all capabilities in child NS might be able to do some privileged operation in **outer** NS
- User NS implementation touched a **lot** of kernel code
  - Perhaps there were/are some unexpected corner case that wasn't correctly handled?
  - A number of such cases have occurred (and been fixed)
  - Common cause: many kernel code paths that could formerly be exercised only by *root* can now be exercised by any user