Linux Security and Isolation APIs Fundamentals

Control Groups (cgroups): Introduction

Michael Kerrisk, man7.org

March 2023

mtk@man7.org

Outline

Rev: # 87cd7f6a9eb1

Outline

Goals

- We'll focus on:
  - General principles of operation; goals of cgroups
  - The `cgroup2` filesystem
  - Interacting with `cgroup2` filesystem using shell commands
- We'll look **briefly** at some of the controllers

Resources

- Kernel documentation files
  - V2: `Documentation/admin-guide/cgroup-v2.rst`
  - V1: `Documentation/admin-guide/cgroup-v1/*.rst`
    - Before Linux 5.3: `Documentation/cgroup-v1/*.txt`
- *cgroups(7)* man page
- Neil Brown's (2014) LWN.net series on cgroups: `https://lwn.net/Articles/604609/`
  - Thought-provoking commentary on the meaning of grouping and hierarchy
- `https://lwn.net/Articles/484254/` – Tejun Heo's initial thoughts about redesigning cgroups (Feb 2012)
  - See also `https://lwn.net/Articles/484251/`, *Fixing Control Groups*, Jon Corbet, Feb 2012
- Other articles at `https://lwn.net/Kernel/Index/#Control_groups`

Some history

- 2006/2007, "Process Containers" @ Google ⇒ Cgroups v1
- Jan 2008: initial mainline kernel release (Linux 2.6.24)
  - Three resource controllers (all CPU-related) in initial release
- Subsequently, other controllers are added
  - `memory`, `devices`, `freezer`, `net_cls`, `blkio`...
- But a few years of uncoordinated design leads to a mess
  - Decentralized design fails us... again
- 2012: work has already begun on cgroups v2...

Some history

- Sep 2015: *systemd* adds cgroup v2 support
  - (Based on kernel 4.2)
- Mar 2016: cgroups v2 officially released (Linux 4.5)
  - But, lacks feature parity with cgroups v1
- Jan 2018: `cpu` controller is released for cgroups v2
  - (Absence had been major roadblock to adoption of v2)
- Oct 2019: Fedora 31 is first distro to move to v2-by-default
- 2020: Docker 20.10 gets cgroups v2 support
- 2021: other distros move to v2-by-default
  - Debian 11.0 (Aug 2021); Ubuntu 21.10 (Oct 2021); Arch

We have passed the tipping point

- Various (proprietary) infrastructure still depends on cgroups v1
- But:
  - A lot of migration work has already been done, *systemd* supports pure v2-only, and the distros have migrated to v2
  - Cgroups v2 offers a number of advantages over v1
- ⇒ we'll focus on cgroups v2, and largely ignore cgroups v1

Outline

What are control groups?

- Two principal components:
  - A **mechanism for hierarchically grouping** processes
  - A set of **controllers** (kernel components) that manage, control, or monitor processes in cgroups
- Interface is via a pseudo-filesystem
- Cgroup manipulation takes form of filesystem operations, which might be done:
  - Via shell commands
  - Programmatically
  - Via management daemon (e.g., *systemd*)
  - Via your container framework's tools (e.g., LXC, Docker)

What do cgroups allow us to do?

- Limit resource usage of group
  - E.g., limit % of CPU available to group; limit amount of memory that group can use
- Resource accounting
  - Measure resources used by processes in group
- Limit device access
- Pin processes to CPU cores
- Shape network traffic
- Freeze a group
  - Freeze, restore, and checkpoint a group
- And more...

Terminology

- **Control group**: a group of processes that are bound together for purpose of resource management
- **(Resource) controller**: kernel component that controls or monitors processes in a cgroup
  - E.g., `memory` controller limits memory usage; `cpu` controller limits CPU usage
  - Also known as **subsystem**
    - (But that term is rather ambiguous because so generic)
- Cgroups are arranged in a **hierarchy**
  - Each cgroup can have zero or more child cgroups
  - Child cgroups **inherit** control settings from parent

Filesystem interface

- Cgroup filesystem **directory structure defines cgroups + cgroup hierarchy**
  - I.e., use *mkdir(2)* / *rmdir(2)* (or equivalent shell commands) to create cgroups
- Each **subdirectory contains automagically created files**
  - Some files are used to **manage the cgroup** itself
  - Other files are **controller-specific**
- Files in cgroup are used to:
  - **Define/display membership** of cgroup
  - **Control behavior** of processes in cgroup
  - **Expose information** about processes in cgroup (e.g., resource usage stats)

The cgroup2 filesystem

- On boot, *systemd* mounts v2 hierarchy at `/sys/fs/cgroup`
  - (or `/sys/fs/cgroup/unified`, if *systemd* is operating in cgroups "hybrid" mode)

```
# mount -t cgroup2 none /sys/fs/cgroup
```

- The (pseudo)filesystem type is "`cgroup2`"
  - In cgroups v1, filesystem type is "`cgroup`"
- The cgroups v2 mount is sometimes known as the "unified" hierarchy
  - Because all controllers are associated with a single hierarchy
  - By contrast, in v1 there were multiple hierarchies

Booting to cgroups v2

- You may be on a distro that uses *systemd*'s "hybrid" mode by default
  - Hybrid mode combines use of cgroups v1 and v2
- Problem: can't simultaneously use a controller in both v1 and v2
- Simplest solution is usually to reboot, so that *systemd* abandons its hybrid mode, and uses just v2
  - If this shows a value > 1, then you need to reboot:

```
$ grep -c cgroup /proc/mounts      # Count cgroup mounts
```

  - **Either**: use kernel boot parameter, `cgroup_no_v1`:
    - `cgroup_no_v1=all` ⇒ disable all v1 controllers
  - **Or**: use `systemd.unified_cgroup_hierarchy` boot parameter

Outline

Example: the pids controller

- pids ("process number") controller allows us to limit number of PIDs in cgroup (prevent *fork()* bombs!)
- Create new cgroup, and place shell's PID in that cgroup:

```
# mkdir /sys/fs/cgroup/mygrp
# echo $$
17273
# echo $$ > /sys/fs/cgroup/mygrp/cgroup.procs
```

  - cgroup.procs defines/displays PIDs in cgroup
  - (Note '#' prompt ⇒ all commands done as superuser)
- Moving a PID into a group automatically removes it from group of which it was formerly a member
  - I.e., a process is always a member of exactly one group in the hierarchy

Example: the pids controller

- Can read `cgroup.procs` to see PIDs in group:

```
# cat /sys/fs/cgroup/mygrp/cgroup.procs
17273
20591
```

  - Where did PID 20591 come from?
  - PID 20591 is *cat* command, created as a child of shell
    - Child process inherits cgroup membership from parent
- `pids.current` shows how many processes are in group:

```
# cat /sys/fs/cgroup/mygrp/pids.current
2
```

  - Two processes: shell + *cat*

Example: the pids controller

- We can limit number of PIDs in group using `pids.max` file:

```
# echo 5 > /sys/fs/cgroup/mygrp/pids.max
# for a in $(seq 1 5); do sleep 60 & done
[1] 21283
[2] 21284
[3] 21285
[4] 21286
bash: fork: retry: Resource temporarily unavailable
bash: fork: retry: Resource temporarily unavailable
bash: fork: retry: Resource temporarily unavailable
bash: fork: Resource temporarily unavailable
```

  - (The shell retries a few times and then gives up)
  - `pids.max` defines/exposes limit on number of PIDs in cgroup
- From a **different** shell, examine `pids.current`:

```
$ cat /sys/fs/cgroup/mygrp/pids.current
5
```

  - Not possible from first shell (can't create more processes)

Outline

Creating cgroups

- Initially, all processes on system are members of **root cgroup**
- New cgroups are **created** by creating subdirectories under cgroup mount point:

```
# mkdir /sys/fs/cgroup/mygrp
```

- Relationships between cgroups are reflected by creating nested (arbitrarily deep) subdirectory structure

Destroying cgroups

An **empty cgroup** can be **destroyed** by removing directory

- **Empty** == last process in cgroup terminates or migrates to another cgroup **and** last child cgroup is removed
  - Presence of zombie process does **not** prevent removal of cgroup directory
    - (Notionally, zombies are moved to root cgroup)
- Not necessary (or possible) to delete attribute files inside cgroup directory before deleting it

Placing a process in a cgroup

- To move a **process** to a cgroup, we write its PID to `cgroup.procs` file in corresponding subdirectory

```
# echo $$ > /sys/fs/cgroup/mygrp/cgroup.procs
```

  - In multithreaded process, moves all threads to cgroup
- ⚠ Can write only one PID at a time
  - Otherwise, *write()* fails with `EINVAL`

Viewing cgroup membership

- **To see PIDs in cgroup**, read `cgroup.procs` file
  - PIDs are newline-separated
  - Zombie processes do not appear in list
- ⚠ List is **not guaranteed to be sorted or free of duplicates**
  - PID might be moved out and back into cgroup or recycled while reading list

Cgroup membership details

- A **process can be member of just one cgroup**
  - That association defines attributes / parameters that apply to the process
- Adding a process to a different cgroup automatically removes it from previous cgroup
- On *fork()*, **child inherits cgroup membership(s)** of parent
  - Afterward, cgroup membership(s) of parent and child can be independently changed
  - Since Linux 5.7 (2020), a child process can be created in a specific v2 cgroup using *clone3()* `CLONE_INTO_CGROUP`
    - See `procexec/t_CLONE_INTO_CGROUP.c`

/proc/PID/cgroup file

- /proc/PID/cgroup shows cgroup memberships of PID

```
8:cpu,cpuacct:/cpugrp3
7:freezer:/
...
0::/grp1
```

1. Hierarchy ID (0 for v2 hierarchy)
   - Can be matched to hierarchy ID in another file, /proc/cgroups (but that file is not so interesting)
2. Comma-separated list of controllers bound to the hierarchy
   - Field is empty for v2 hierarchy
3. Pathname of cgroup to which this process belongs
   - Pathname is relative to cgroup root directory

- On a system booted in v2-only mode, there is just one line in this file (0::...)

Notes for online practical sessions

- Small groups in **breakout rooms**
  - Write a note into Slack if you have a preferred group
- **We will go faster, if groups collaborate** on solving the exercise(s)
  - You can **share a screen** in your room
- I will circulate regularly between rooms to answer questions
- Zoom has an "**Ask for help**" button...
- **Keep an eye on the #general Slack channel**
  - Perhaps with further info about exercise;
  - Or a note that the exercise merges into a break
- When your room has finished, write a message in the Slack channel: **"***** Room X has finished *****"**
  - Then I have an idea of how many people have finished

Shared screen etiquette

- It may help your colleagues if you **use a larger than normal font!**
  - In many environments (e.g., *xterm*, *VS Code*), we can adjust the font size with `Control+Shift+"+"` and `Control+"-"`
  - Or (e.g., *emacs*) hold down `Control` key and use mouse wheel
- **Long shell prompts** make reading your shell session difficult
  - Use `PS1='$ '` or `PS1='# '`
- **Low contrast** color themes are difficult to read; change this if you can
- Turn on **line numbering** in your editor
  - In *vim* use: `:set number`
  - In *emacs* use: `M-x display-line-numbers-mode <RETURN>`
    - `M-x` means `Left-Alt+x`
- For collaborative editing, **relative line-numbering is evil**....
  - In *vim* use: `:set nornu`
  - In *emacs*, the following should suffice:

```
M-: (display-line-numbers-mode) <RETURN>
M-: (setq display-line-numbers 'absolute) <RETURN>
```

    - `M-:` means `Left-Alt+Shift+:`

Using *tmate* in in-person practical sessions

In order to share an X-term session with others, do the following:

- Enter the command *tmate* in an X-term, and you will see the following:

```
$ tmate
...
Connecting to ssh.tmate.io...
Note: clear your terminal before sharing readonly access
web session read only: ...
ssh session read only: ...
web session: ...
ssh session: ssh SOmErAnDOm5Tr1Ng@lon1.tmate.io
```

- Share the last "ssh" string with your colleagues via Slack or another channel
- Your colleagues should paste that string into an X-term...
  - After that, you will be sharing an X-term session in which anyone can type

Booting to cgroups v2

- **In preparation for the following exercises**, if necessary reboot your system to use cgroups v2 only, as follows...
- First, check whether your system is already booted to use cgroups v2 only:

```
$ grep cgroup /proc/mounts       # Is there a v2 mount?
cgroup2 /sys/fs/cgroup cgroup2 ...
$ grep cgroup /proc/mounts | grep -v name= | grep -vc cgroup2
0                                # 0 == no v1 controllers are mounted
```

  - If there is a v2 mount, and no v1 controllers are mounted, then you do not need to do anything further; otherwise:
- From the GRUB boot menu, you can boot to cgroups v2–only mode by editing the boot command (select a GRUB menu entry and type "e"). In the line that begins with "`linux`", add the following parameter:

```
systemd.unified_cgroup_hierarchy
```


Exercises

1. In this exercise, we create a cgroup, place a process in the cgroup, and then migrate that process to a different cgroup.
   - Create two subdirectories, `m1` and `m2`, in the cgroup root directory.
   - Execute the following command, and note the PID assigned to the resulting process:

```
# sleep 300 &
```

   - Write the PID of the process created in the previous step into the file `m1/cgroup.procs`, and verify by reading the file contents.
   - Now write the PID of the process into the file `m2/cgroup.procs`.
   - Is the PID still visible in the file `m1/cgroup.procs`? Explain.
   - Try removing cgroup `m1` using the command `rm -rf m1`. Why doesn't this work?
   - If it is still running, kill the *sleep* process and then remove the cgroups `m1` and `m2` using the *rmdir* command.

Outline

Enabling and disabling controllers

- Each cgroup v2 directory contains two files:
  - `cgroup.controllers`: lists controllers that are **available** in this cgroup
  - `cgroup.subtree_control`: used to list/modify set of controllers that are **enabled** in this cgroup
    - Always a subset of `cgroup.controllers`
- Together, these files allow different controllers to be managed to **different levels of granularity** in v2 hierarchy

Available controllers: cgroup.controllers

- cgroup.controllers lists the controllers that are available in a cgroup:

```
$ cat /sys/fs/cgroup/cgroup.controllers
cpuset cpu io memory hugetlb pids misc
```

- A controller may not be available because:
  - The same controller is **already in use in cgroups v1**
    - Cgroups v1 and v2 can coexist, but a controller can be used in only one version
    - Must unmount controller in v1 (often easier to reboot...)
  - Controller is **not enabled in parent cgroup**
  - Kernel was built without support for that controller or controller was disabled at boot via cgroup_disable option
- Certain "automatic" controllers are always available in every cgroup, and are not listed in cgroup.controllers
  - E.g., devices, freezer, perf_event

Enabling controllers: cgroup.subtree_control

- cgroup.subtree_control is used to show or modify the set of controllers that are enabled in a cgroup:

```
# cd /sys/fs/cgroup/
# cat cgroup.subtree_control
cpu io memory pids
```

  - Set of controllers enabled in root cgroup will depend on distro and *systemd* configuration and version
- Contents of cgroup.subtree_control are always a subset of cgroup.controllers
  - I.e., can't enable controller that is not available in a cgroup
- Controllers are enabled/disabled by writing to this file:

```
# echo '+cpuset' > cgroup.subtree_control    # Enable a controller
# cat cgroup.subtree_control
cpuset cpu io memory pids
# echo '-cpuset' > cgroup.subtree_control    # Disable a controller
# cat cgroup.subtree_control
cpu io memory pids
```

Enabling controllers: cgroup.subtree_control

- Enabling a controller in cgroup.subtree_control:
  - Allows resource to be **controlled in child cgroups**
  - **Causes controller-specific attribute files to appear in each child directory**
- Attribute files in child cgroups are **used by process managing parent cgroup** to manage resource allocation into child cgroups
  - This is a significant difference from cgroups v1

cgroup.subtree_control example

- Review situation in root cgroup:

```
# cd /sys/fs/cgroup/
# cat cgroup.controllers
cpuset cpu io memory hugetlb pids misc
# cat cgroup.subtree_control
cpu io memory pids
```

- Create a small subhierarchy:

```
# mkdir -p grp_x/grp_y
```

- Controllers available in grp_x are those that were enabled at level above; no controllers are enabled in grp_x:

```
# cat grp_x/cgroup.controllers
cpu io memory pids
# cat grp_x/cgroup.subtree_control                # Empty...
```

- Consequently, no controllers are available in grp_y:

```
# cat grp_x/grp_y/cgroup.controllers              # Empty...
```

cgroup.subtree_control example

- List cpu.* files in grp_y:

```
# cd /sys/fs/cgroup/grp_x
# ls grp_y/cpu.*
grp_y/cpu.pressure  grp_y/cpu.stat
```

  - (These two files show CPU-related statistics and are present in every cgroup)

- Enabling cpu controller in parent cgroup (grp_x) causes controller interface files to appear in child (grp_y) cgroup:

```
# echo '+cpu' > cgroup.subtree_control
# ls grp_y/cpu.*
grp_y/cpu.idle          grp_y/cpu.max.burst  grp_y/cpu.stat
grp_y/cpu.weight.nice   grp_y/cpu.max        grp_y/cpu.pressure
grp_y/cpu.weight
```


cgroup.subtree_control example

- After enabling controller in parent cgroup, we can limit resources in child cgroup...
- Set hard CPU limit of 50% in child cgroup (grp_y):

```
# echo '50000 100000' > grp_y/cpu.max
```

- In another window, we start a program that burns CPU time and displays statistics; and we move it into grp_y:

```
# echo 6445 > grp_y/cgroup.procs    # 6445 is PID of burner process
```

- In the other terminal, we see:

```
$ ./cpu_burner
[6445]  %CPU = 99.86; totCPU = 1.000
[6445]  %CPU = 99.83; totCPU = 2.000
...
[6445]  %CPU = 83.52; totCPU = 6.000
[6445]  %CPU = 50.00; totCPU = 7.000
[6445]  %CPU = 50.00; totCPU = 8.000
...
```

Managing controllers to differing levels of granularity

- A controller is **available in child** cgroup only if it is **enabled in parent** cgroup:

```
# cat cgroup.controllers
cpuset cpu io memory hugetlb pids
# cat cgroup.subtree_control
cpu memory pids
# cat grp1/cgroup.controllers
cpu memory pids
```

  - cpuset, io, and hugetlb are not available in grp1
- In grp1, none of the available controllers is initially enabled, so no controllers are available at next level:

```
# cat grp1/cgroup.controllers
cpu memory pids
# cat grp1/cgroup.subtree_control        # Empty
# mkdir grp1/{grp10,grp11}                # Make grandchild cgroups
# cat grp1/grp2/cgroup.controllers       # Empty
```


Managing controllers to differing levels of granularity

- If we enable cpu in grp1, it becomes available at next level

```
# echo '+cpu' > grp1/cgroup.subtree_control
# cat grp1/grp10/cgroup.controllers
cpu
```

  - And cpu interface files appear in grp1/{grp10,grp11}
- Here, cpu is being managed at finer granularity than memory
  - We can make distinct cpu allocation decisions for processes in grp10 vs processes in grp11
  - But we can't make distinct memory allocation decisions
    - grp10 and grp11 will share memory allocation from grp1
- We **did this by design** (so we can manage different resources to different levels of granularity):
  - We want distinct CPU allocations in grp10 and grp11
  - We want grp10 and grp11 to share a memory allocation

Top-down constraints

- Child cgroups are always subject to any resource constraints established by controllers in ancestor cgroups
  - ⇒ Descendant cgroups can't relax constraints imposed by ancestor cgroups
- If a controller is disabled in a cgroup (i.e., not written to `cgroup.subtree_control` in parent cgroup), it cannot be enabled in any descendants of the cgroup

No internal tasks rule

- Cgroups v2 enforces a rule often expressed as: "a cgroup can't have both child cgroups and member processes"
  - I.e., only leaf nodes can have member processes
  - The "no internal tasks" rule
- But the rule can be expressed more precisely...
- A cgroup can't both:
  - distribute a resource to child cgroups (i.e., enable controllers in `cgroup.subtree_control`), **and**
  - have member processes
- **Note**: root cgroup is an exception to this rule

No internal tasks rule

- Revised statement: "A cgroup can't both distribute resources and have member processes"
- Conversely (1):
  - A cgroup **can** have member processes and child cgroups...
  - **iff** it does not enable controllers for child cgroups
- Conversely (2):
  - If cgroup has child cgroups and processes, the processes must be moved elsewhere before enabling controllers
    - E.g., processes could be moved to child cgroups
- ⚠ This rule changes for certain controllers in Linux 4.14
  - (The so-called "threaded controllers")

Exercises

1. This exercise demonstrates that resource constraints apply in a top-down fashion, using the cgroups v2 `pids` controller.
   - Check that the `pids` controller is visible in the cgroup root `cgroup.controllers` file. If it is not, reboot the kernel as described on slide 11-15.
   - To simplify the following steps, change your current directory to the cgroup root directory (i.e., the location where the `cgroup2` filesystem is mounted; on recent *systemd*-based systems, this will be `/sys/fs/cgroup`, or possibly `/sys/fs/cgroup/unified`).
   - Create a child and grandchild directory in the cgroup filesystem and enable the PIDs controller in the root directory and the first subdirectory:

```
# mkdir xxx
# mkdir xxx/yyy
# echo '+pids' > cgroup.subtree_control
# echo '+pids' > xxx/cgroup.subtree_control
```

[Exercise continues on next page...]

Exercises

- Set an upper limit of 10 tasks in the child cgroup, and an upper limit of 20 tasks in the grandchild cgroup:

```
# echo '10' > xxx/pids.max
# echo '20' > xxx/yyy/pids.max
```

- In another terminal, use the supplied cgroups/fork_bomb.c program.

```
fork_bomb <num-children> [<child-sleep>]
# Default:      0              300
```

  Run the program with the following command line, which (after the user presses *Enter*) will cause the program to create 30 children that sleep for (the default) 300 seconds:

```
$ ./fork_bomb 30
```

[Exercise continues on next page...]

Exercises

- The parent process in the fork_bomb program prints its PID. Return to the first terminal and place the parent process in the grandchild pids cgroup:

```
# echo parent-PID  > xxx/yyy/cgroup.procs
```

- In the second terminal window, press *Enter*, so that the parent process now creates the child processes. How many children does it successfully create?

2. This exercise demonstrates what happens if we try to enable a controller in a cgroup that has member processes.
   - Under the cgroup2 mount point, create a new cgroup named child, and enable the memory controller in the root cgroup:

```
# cd /sys/fs/cgroup             # or: cd /sys/fs/cgroup/unified
# mkdir child
# echo '+memory' > cgroup.subtree_control
```

[Exercise continues on the next slide]

Exercises

- Start a process running *sleep*, and place the process into the `child` cgroup:

```
# sleep 1000 &
# echo $! > child/cgroup.procs
```

- What happens if we now try to enable the `memory` controller in the `child` cgroup via the following command?

```
# echo '+memory' > child/cgroup.subtree_control
```

- Does the result differ if we reverse the order of the preceding steps (i.e., enable the controller, then place a process in the cgroup)?

Notes