

# **Least-Privilege Isolation: The OKWS Web Server**

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# Can We Prevent All Exploits?

- Many varieties of exploits
  - Stack smashing, format strings, heap smashing, return-to-libc
- As many proposed defenses
  - $W \oplus X$ , ASLR, TaintCheck, StackGuard, ...
- Exploit-specific defenses help, but **ever-more vulnerabilities, and adversaries creative**
- Not just a problem with C; consider **SQL injection** in a Python script:

```
q = "SELECT orders FROM accounts WHERE name = " +  
    name  
db.execute(q)
```
- **Programmers make errors**

# Can We Prevent All Exploits?

- Many varieties of exploits
  - Stack smashing, format strings, heap smashing,

**If vulnerabilities and errors are here to stay, how can we limit the harm attackers can do when they exploit a server?**

**vulnerabilities, and adversaries' creative**

- Not just a problem with C; consider **SQL injection** in a Python script:

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- **Programmers make errors**

# Problem: Sharing Services, But Isolating Data

- Servers often hold sensitive data
  - e.g., amazon.com user's credit card number
- Single server shared by distinct users, who often shouldn't see one another's data
  - e.g., different amazon.com shoppers
- Subsystems on single server must cooperate
  - e.g., amazon.com web interface and back-end order database
- Goal: prevent users from obtaining/modifying data other than their own
  - I shouldn't be able to retrieve your order (and credit card number), even if I exploit amazon's web server

# Approach: Compartmentalization

- Give each subsystem **minimal access to system data and resources to do its job**
  - If subsystem exploited, at least **minimize data it can read or modify**
- Define **narrow interfaces between subsystems**, that allow only exact operations required for application
- Design **assuming exploit may occur**, especially in **subsystems closest to users**

# Idea: Principle of Least Privilege (PoLP)

- Each subsystem should **only have access to read/modify data needed for its job**
- Cannot be enforced within subsystem—**must be enforced externally** (i.e., by OS)
- Must **decompose system into subsystems**
  - Must reason carefully about truly minimal set of privileges needed by each subsystem
- Must be able to grant privileges in **fine-grained manner**
  - Else privileges granted to subsystem may be too generous...

# Idea: Privilege Separation

- Determine which subsystems most exposed to attack
- Reduce privileges of most exposed subsystems
  - e.g., amazon payment page can **only insert into order database**, and order database **doesn't have integrated web interface with direct access to data**
  - e.g., ssh login daemon code that processes network input **shouldn't run as root**

# OKWS: A PoLP Web Server on UNIX

- Before OKWS:
  - Apache web server process **monolithic; all code runs as same user**
  - Exploit Apache, and **all data associated with web service becomes accessible**
- **How might we separate a web server into subsystems, to apply PoLP?**
- **Split into multiple processes, each with different, minimal privileges, running as different user IDs**
  - Use **UNIX isolation mechanisms** to prevent subsystems from reading/modifying each other's data



# UNIX Tools for PoLP: chroot()

- `chroot()` system call: set process's notion of file system root; thereafter, can't change directories above that point
- So can do:

```
chdir("/usr/local/alone");  
chroot("/usr/local/alone");  
setuid(61100); (unprivileged user ID)
```
- Now process has **no access to any of filesystem but what's in tree rooted at /usr/local/alone**
  - No access to the many UNIX setuid-root programs, or to sensitive data elsewhere on disk
  - But **must a priori set up all system files needed by process in directory**, e.g., shared libraries, &c.

# UNIX Tools for PoLP: File Descriptor Passing

- Initially, parent server process **privileged**
- Want to run subsystem in **child process**, but with **minimal privileges (e.g., child chroot()ed)**
- Idea: privileged parent opens files needed by unprivileged child, **passes child open file descriptors to these files when it fork()s child**
  - Child can read these files, **even if it can't open them (i.e., because of chroot())**
- Can also pass file descriptors **dynamically** (after fork()) with **sendmsg()**
  - Process that faces network can accept connection, **pass socket for that connection to another process**

# UNIX Tools for PoLP: File Descriptor Passing

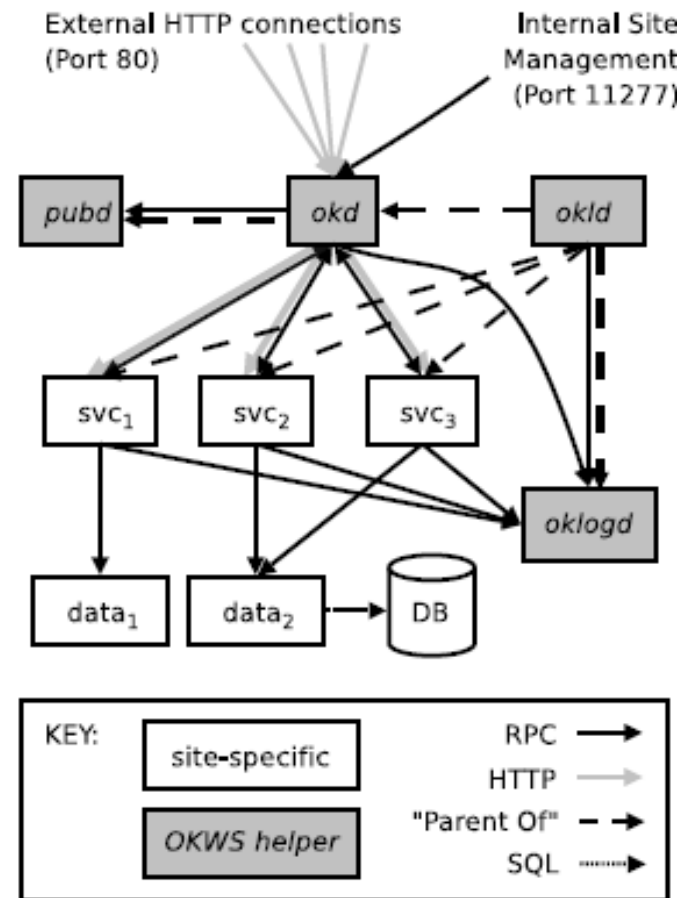
- Initially, parent server process **privileged**
- Want to run subsystem in **child process**, but with

**Powerful primitive:** means can run subsystem with minimal privilege (e.g., can't bind to privileged port 80), but grant it **specific network connections or specific files**

- Child can read these files, **even if it can't open them** (i.e., because of `chroot()`)
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# OKWS System Design

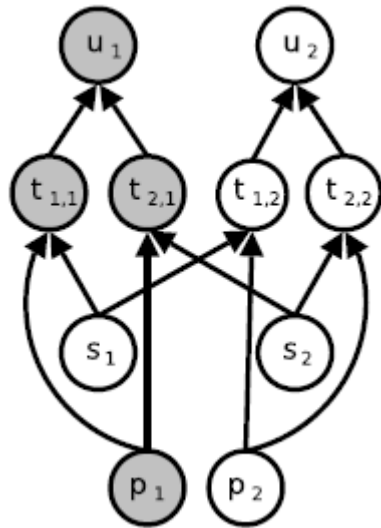
- okd process **parses user input**, holds no sensitive data
- $\text{svc}_i$  process **parses user input for one service**; runs in **chroot()ed "jail"**
- database proxy process **only accepts authenticated requests for subset of narrow RPC interface**; **can read sensitive data**



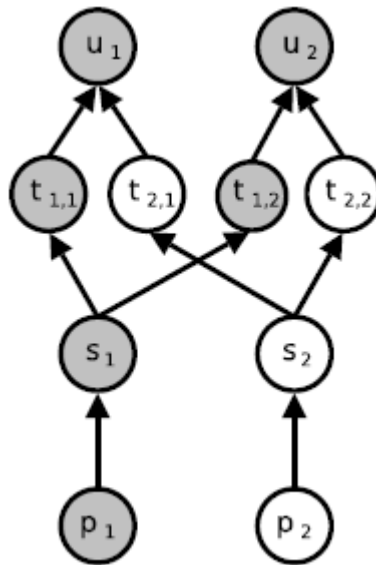
# Analyzing Privilege-Separated Designs

- What data does subsystem have access to, with what permissions?
- How complex is the code in a subsystem (e.g., parsing notoriously hard to get right)?
- What input does a subsystem receive?
  - Less structured → more worrying
  - e.g., okld runs as root; **should we worry about exploits of it?**

# Strength of Isolation vs. Performance



**"Strict" Model**



**OKWS Model**

- $s_i$ : services
- $u_j$ : users
- $p_k$ : processes
- $t_{i,j}$ : state for user  $j$  in service  $i$

- One process per user gives strictest isolation, but means many, many processes → **low performance**
- OKWS uses **one process per service** for performance reasons; so **compromised service may reveal one user's data to another**

# OKWS Summary

- Shows that PoLP and privilege separation hold real promise for limiting harm exploits can do
- Programming model for services requires new style of programming
  - Can't use the file system; services chroot()ed
  - Must define narrow, per-service interfaces to database
  - Must communicate explicitly using RPC between service and database