Zombie process · Site Reliability Engineer HandBook

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Zombie process

On Unix and Unix-like computer operating systems, a zombie process or defunct process is a process that has completed execution (via the exit system call) but still has an entry in the process table: it is a process in the "Terminated state".

This occurs for child processes, where the entry is still needed to allow the parent process to read its child's exit status: once the exit status is read via the wait system call, the zombie's entry is removed from the process table and it is said to be "reaped". A child process always first becomes a zombie before being removed from the resource table.

In most cases, under normal system operation zombies are immediately waited on by their parent and then reaped by the system – processes that stay zombies for a long time are generally an error and cause a resource leak.

The term zombie process derives from the common definition of zombie — an undead person. In the term's metaphor, the child process has "died" but has not yet been "reaped". Also, unlike normal processes, the kill command has no effect on a zombie process.

Zombie processes should not be confused with orphan processes: an orphan process is a process that is still executing, but whose parent has died. These do not remain as zombie processes; instead, (like all orphaned processes) they are adopted by init (process ID 1), which waits on its children. The result is that a process that is both a zombie and an orphan will be reaped automatically.

PROCESS STATES

- Zombie: has completed execution, still has an entry in the process table
- Orphan: parent has finished or terminated while this process is still running
- Daemon: runs as a background process, not under the direct control of an interactive user