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## Defense Primer: Military Enlisted Personnel

### Grade and Rank

The armed forces are hierarchical organizations with clearly defined levels of authority. These different levels are called *grades*, while *rank* refers to the order of precedence among those in different grades and within the same grade (e.g., someone who has been a Sergeant for three years outranks someone who has been a Sergeant for two years). However, it is common for the term rank to be used as a synonym for grade. Pay grade is an administrative classification that determines certain rates of pay, but it is sometimes used to indicate grade as well. For example, a Staff Sergeant in the Army may also be referred to as an E-6. See **Figure 1**. The Service Secretaries manage the accession, promotion, and assignments of enlisted members under broad statutory authorities.

### Numbers and Roles

Enlisted personnel make up about 81% of the armed forces, with officers making up the remaining 19%. Enlisted personnel rank below all officers. **Table 1** lists the number of active duty enlisted personnel in each pay grade.

**Junior enlisted personnel** (pay grades E-1 to E-4) typically work in small units across the DOD. Individuals normally serve in these grades during their first enlistment term (usually four years). More senior enlisted personnel

supervise them. Junior enlisted make up about 53% of the enlisted workforce.

**Mid-level Noncommissioned Officers (NCOs)** (pay grades E-5 to E-7). NCOs have significantly more responsibility than junior enlisted personnel. They lead small units, typically ranging from a few to several dozen personnel, and serve as technical experts in their occupational specialties. NCOs at this level translate orders from their superior officers into action. They make up about 44% of the enlisted workforce.

**Senior Noncommissioned Officers** (pay grades E-8 and E-9) typically serve as senior enlisted advisors to commanders or as staff NCOs. They also serve as a channel of support for the enlisted force in general. By law, enlisted personnel in pay grades E-8 and E-9 may not be more than 2.15% and 1.25%, respectively, of the number of enlisted members of a given Service who are on active duty (10 U.S.C. §517; if the number of E-9s is below the cap, the difference may be applied to increase the number of E-8s).

### Insignia

As shown in **Figure 1**, each enlisted grade in the armed forces has distinctive insignia, typically worn on the sleeve, shoulder, collar, and/or headgear (caps, berets, helmets, etc.).

**Table 1. Active Duty Military Enlisted by Pay Grade (as of September 30, 2018)**

Pay Grade	Services				Total
	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force	
E-9	3,508	2,641	1,580	2,640	10,369
E-8	10,580	6,620	3,920	5,075	26,195
E-7	35,769	21,294	8,635	25,388	91,086
E-6	54,188	49,237	14,145	39,695	157,265
E-5	65,544	67,876	26,022	61,672	221,114
E-4	106,466	51,965	35,626	51,545	245,602
E-3	50,488	42,796	42,503	55,267	191,054
E-2	27,491	15,408	20,869	7,192	70,960
E-1	25,571	12,821	10,783	10,504	59,679

Source: Department of Defense, Defense Manpower Data Center.

Figure 1. Pay Grade, Grade, and Insignia of Enlisted Service Members

Paygrade	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force
E1	Private <i>NO INSIGNIA</i>	Seaman Recruit <i>NO INSIGNIA</i>	Private <i>NO INSIGNIA</i>	Airman Basic <i>NO INSIGNIA</i>
E2	Private E-2 	Seaman Apprentice 	Private First Class 	Airman 
E3	Private First Class 	Seaman 	Lance Corporal 	Airman First Class 
E4	Corporal Specialist 	Petty Officer Third Class 	Corporal 	Senior Airman 
E5	Sergeant 	Petty Officer Second Class 	Sergeant 	Staff Sergeant 
E6	Staff Sergeant 	Petty Officer First Class 	Staff Sergeant 	Technical Sergeant 
E7	Sergeant First Class 	Chief Petty Officer 	Gunnery Sergeant 	Master Sergeant First Sergeant 
E8	Master Sergeant First Sergeant 	Senior Chief Petty Officer 	Master Sergeant First Sergeant 	Senior Master Sergeant First Sergeant 
E9	Sergeant Major Command Sergeant Major 	Master Chief Petty Officer Fleet/Command Master Chief Petty Officer 	Master Gunnery Sergeant Sergeant Major 	Chief Master Sergeant First Sergeant Command Chief Master Sergeant 
E9	Sergeant Major of the Army 	Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy 	Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps 	Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force 

Source: CRS adaptation of Department of Defense webpage: <https://dod.defense.gov/About/Insignias/Enlisted/>.

**Relevant Statute**

Chapter 31 of Title 10, U.S.C.

**Other Resources**

Department of Defense Instruction 1304.30, Enlisted Personnel Management Plan (EPMP) Procedures, March 14, 2006.  
Army Regulation 600-20, Army Command Policy, November 6, 2014.

**Other Resources (continued)**

NAVPERS 18068F, Volume 1, Manual of Navy Enlisted Manpower and Personnel Classifications and Occupational Standards, July 2018.

Air Force Instruction 36-2618, The Enlisted Force Structure, July 5, 2018.

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