



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 82% of the armed forces, with officers making up the remaining 18%. 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 Department of Defense. Individuals normally serve in these grades during their first enlistment term (usually four years). More senior enlisted personnel supervise them. Junior enlisted personnel make up about 52% 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, the authorized daily average of enlisted personnel in pay grades E-8 and E-9 may not be more than 2.5% and 1.25%, respectively, of the number of enlisted members in a given Service on the first day of the fiscal year. If the number of E-9s is below the cap, the difference may be applied to increase the number of E-8s. The statutory caps can be waived in certain circumstances (10 U.S.C. §517).

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, 2020)

Pay Grade	Services				Total
	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force	
E-9	3,485	2,720	1,577	2,632	10,414
E-8	10,952	7,090	3,952	5,277	27,271
E-7	36,461	22,732	8,216	26,536	93,945
E-6	59,013	51,041	14,846	42,462	167,362
E-5	68,030	71,686	23,813	61,506	225,035
E-4	112,230	59,121	36,190	57,461	265,002
E-3	54,142	41,104	44,057	53,461	192,764
E-2	24,615	16,147	17,807	7,896	66,465
E-1	18,983	14,696	9,050	8,138	50,867
Total	387,911	286,337	159,508	265,369	1,099,125

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 web page: <https://dod.defense.gov/About/Insignias/Enlisted/>.

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

Other Resources
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, January 2019.
Air Force Instruction 36-2618, The Enlisted Force Structure, October 16, 2018.

Lawrence Kapp, Specialist in Military Manpower Policy

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