



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 51% 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 45% 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, 2022)

Pay Grade	Services				Total
	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force/Space Force	
E-9	3,501	2,765	1,598	2,613	10,477
E-8	10,694	7,249	3,946	4,788	26,677
E-7	36,702	22,890	8,361	25,915	93,868
E-6	57,742	51,172	13,361	44,857	167,132
E-5	69,861	70,452	22,314	60,411	223,038
E-4	113,412	53,894	32,654	61,854	261,814
E-3	48,339	50,210	42,271	46,138	186,958
E-2	16,340	13,085	17,434	8,032	54,891
E-1	10,994	11,799	11,147	8,872	42,812
Total	367,585	283,516	153,086	263,480	1,067,667

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	Space Force
E1	Private <i>NO INSIGNIA</i>	Seaman Recruit <i>NO INSIGNIA</i>	Private <i>NO INSIGNIA</i>	Airman Basic <i>NO INSIGNIA</i>	Specialist 1 
E2	Private E-2 	Seaman Apprentice 	Private First Class 	Airman 	Specialist 2 
E3	Private First Class 	Seaman 	Lance Corporal 	Airman First Class 	Specialist 3 
E4	Corporal  Specialist 	Petty Officer Third Class 	Corporal 	Senior Airman 	Specialist 4 
E5	Sergeant 	Petty Officer Second Class 	Sergeant 	Staff Sergeant 	Sergeant 
E6	Staff Sergeant 	Petty Officer First Class 	Staff Sergeant 	Techical Sergeant 	Technical Sergeant 
E7	Sergeant First Class 	Chief Petty Officer 	Gunnery Sergeant 	Master Sergeant  First Sergeant 	Master Sergeant 
E8	Master Sergeant  First Sergeant 	Senior Chief Petty Officer 	Master Sergeant  First Sergeant 	Senior Master Sergeant  First Sergeant 	Senior Master 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 	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/>, and insignia provided by U.S. Space Force legislative liaison.

Resources

Chapter 31 of Title 10, U.S.C.
 Army Regulation 611-1, Military Occupational Classification Structure Development and Implementation, July 2019.
 NAVPERS 18068F, Volume 1, Manual of Navy Enlisted Manpower and Personnel Classifications and Occupational Standards, October 2022.

Resources (continued)

U.S. Air Force, The Enlisted Force Structure, May 2022.

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