



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 and military service academy cadets and midshipmen 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 50% 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.

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 3.0% 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. Department of Defense Active Duty Military Enlisted by Pay Grade (as of August 31, 2024)

Pay Grade	Services					Total
	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force	Space Force	
E-9	3,475	2,831	1,696	2,457	50	10,337
E-8	10,402	7,112	4,035	4,805	135	26,739
E-7	35,173	23,760	8,737	22,704	617	88,589
E-6	56,866	51,565	13,292	38,743	834	164,726
E-5	66,138	72,249	23,779	52,813	1,065	217,374
E-4	97,220	53,714	31,347	68,439	771	249,741
E-3	49,546	29,189	38,429	44,126	997	162,594
E-2	21,414	16,551	16,757	8,967	207	63,975
E-1	9,807	13,569	11,985	8,935	222	40,609
Total	350,041	270,540	150,057	251,989	4,898	1,024,684

Source: Department of Defense, Defense Manpower Data Center, *Active Duty Military Personnel by Service by Rank/Grade*, August 2024.

Figure 1. Pay Grade, Grade, and Insignia of Enlisted Servicemembers

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 	Technical 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 	Chief Master Sergeant of the Space Force 					

Source: CRS adaptation of Department of Defense web page: <https://dod.defense.gov/About/Insignias/Enlisted/>, The U.S. Coast Guard, which normally falls under the Department of Homeland Security, uses the same names for enlisted ranks as the Navy.

Resources

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

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