

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 March 31, 2025)

Pay Grade	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force	Space Force	Total
E-9	3,369	2,870	1,598	2,433	58	10,328
E-8	10,948	6,774	3,794	5,040	138	26,694
E-7	34,635	23,027	8,356	23,248	647	89,913
E-6	56,659	53,183	14,075	38,053	951	162,921
E-5	65,442	72,991	24,704	51,383	1,036	215,556
E-4	94,903	49,167	31,324	68,972	769	245,135
E-3	52,263	33,410	38,542	46,090	1,130	171,435
E-2	27,202	18,119	19,125	8,885	206	73,537
E-1	8,520	15,552	5,297	9,818	169	39,356
Total	353,941	275,093	146,815	253,922	5,104	1,034,875

Source: Department of Defense, Defense Manpower Data Center, *Active Duty Military Personnel by Service by Rank/Grade*, March 2025.

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. Code*

Army Regulation 611-1, Military Occupational Classification Structure Development and Implementation.

NAVPERS 18068F, Volume I, 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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