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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 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 Armed Forces. 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. 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 September 30, 2025)

| Pay Grade | Army | Navy | Marine Corps | Air Force | Space Force | Total |
|--------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|--------------|------------------|
| E-9 | 3,468 | 2,954 | 1,618 | 2,433 | 63 | 10,536 |
| E-8 | 10,551 | 6,883 | 3,834 | 5,085 | 147 | 26,500 |
| E-7 | 35,348 | 24,021 | 8,237 | 23,193 | 665 | 91,464 |
| E-6 | 57,033 | 52,277 | 14,409 | 37,750 | 1,042 | 162,511 |
| E-5 | 66,040 | 72,728 | 24,641 | 51,405 | 1,047 | 215,861 |
| E-4 | 95,338 | 45,049 | 30,874 | 67,159 | 749 | 239,169 |
| E-3 | 57,124 | 37,344 | 39,235 | 47,817 | 1,212 | 182,732 |
| E-2 | 24,948 | 26,470 | 16,669 | 9,771 | 233 | 78,091 |
| E-1 | 8,161 | 13,090 | 12,217 | 8,999 | 178 | 42,645 |
| Total | 358,011 | 280,816 | 151,734 | 253,612 | 5,336 | 1,049,509 |

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

Note: The Department of Defense is “using a secondary Department of War (DOW) designation,” under Executive Order 14347, dated September 5, 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://www.war.gov/Our-Story/Insignias/#enlisted-insignias>. 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, September 2025.

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