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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 make up about 81% of the armed forces, with officers making up the remaining 19%. 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 DOD. Individuals normally serve in these grades during their first enlistment term (usually four years). More senior enlisted personnel

supervise them. Junior enlisted make up about 53% 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, enlisted personnel in pay grades E-8 and E-9 may not be more than 2.15% and 1.25%, respectively, of the number of enlisted members of a given Service who are on active duty (10 U.S.C. §517; if the number of E-9s is below the cap, the difference may be applied to increase the number of E-8s).

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, 2018)

| Pay Grade | Services | | | | Total |
|-----------|----------|--------|--------------|-----------|---------|
| | Army | Navy | Marine Corps | Air Force | |
| E-9 | 3,508 | 2,641 | 1,580 | 2,640 | 10,369 |
| E-8 | 10,580 | 6,620 | 3,920 | 5,075 | 26,195 |
| E-7 | 35,769 | 21,294 | 8,635 | 25,388 | 91,086 |
| E-6 | 54,188 | 49,237 | 14,145 | 39,695 | 157,265 |
| E-5 | 65,544 | 67,876 | 26,022 | 61,672 | 221,114 |
| E-4 | 106,466 | 51,965 | 35,626 | 51,545 | 245,602 |
| E-3 | 50,488 | 42,796 | 42,503 | 55,267 | 191,054 |
| E-2 | 27,491 | 15,408 | 20,869 | 7,192 | 70,960 |
| E-1 | 25,571 | 12,821 | 10,783 | 10,504 | 59,679 |

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

Relevant Statute

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

Other Resources

Department of Defense Instruction 1304.30, Enlisted Personnel Management Plan (EPMP) Procedures, March 14, 2006.
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, July 2018.

Air Force Instruction 36-2618, The Enlisted Force Structure, July 5, 2018.

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