American Community Survey (ACS)
Why We Ask: Race

We ask about a person’s race to create statistics about these race groups and to present other estimates by race group. Race statistics are used in planning and evaluating government programs and policies to ensure they fairly serve the needs of each community and to monitor against discrimination in these programs and in society.

Though, a question about race has been included on the Decennial Census since 1790, the categories have changed over time. The Census Bureau collects racial data in accordance with the 1997 Office of Management and Budget (OMB) standards on race and ethnicity. The racial categories are based on self-identification and generally reflect a social definition of race and not an attempt to define race biologically, anthropologically, or genetically. In addition, people may choose to report more than one race to indicate their racial identity.

The question as it appears on the 2016 ACS paper questionnaire. This topic was introduced on the Decennial Census of 1790, and was transferred to the ACS when it replaced the Decennial Census long-form in 2005.

Examples of Federal Uses
- Required to identify vulnerable populations which may be at disproportionate risk of experiencing limitations in health care access, poor health quality, and suboptimal health outcomes.
- Required to enforce against discrimination in education, employment, voting, financial assistance, and housing.
- Used in many reporting and research tasks to investigate whether there are race differences in education, employment, home ownership, health, income and many other areas of interest to policymakers.

Examples of Other Uses
State and local agencies use these statistics to understand the needs of all the groups in their communities over time. Some social, economic, or housing trends may have different impacts for different race groups; understanding these changes may highlight future social and economic challenges. Advocacy groups use statistics about specific race groups to understand current and future challenges and to advocate for policies that benefit their groups.