American Community Survey (ACS)
Why We Ask: Marital Status and History

We ask about a person’s marital status, changes in marital status in the past 12 months, and lifetime marital history to create estimates about marital status and marital history. These estimates are used to help federal agencies understand marriage trends, forecast future needs of programs that have spousal benefits, and measure the effects of policies and programs that focus on the well-being of families, including tax policies and financial assistance programs.

The questions as they appear on the 2014 ACS paper questionnaire. This topic was introduced on the Decennial Census of 1850, and a marital status question was transferred to the ACS when it replaced the Decennial Census long-form in 2005. The marital history questions were added to the ACS in 2008.

Examples of Federal Uses
- Required in researching and reporting tasks for programs with spousal benefits and effects, including veterans’ and social security programs.
- Used to analyze family formation, and to understand the different types of families in need, and in federal programs that benefit low-income families.

Examples of Other Uses
State and local agencies use these statistics, in combination with number of children, income, and employment to determine what kinds of social services might be needed in a community. Health care and community services may use this information to understand the percentage of older people in a community without spousal support, who may need additional care as they age. Advocacy groups use these statistics to understand current and future challenges and to advocate for policies that benefit their groups. Researchers use these statistics to understand marriage trends, changing attitudes about marriage, blended families, etc.