Behind the Numbers
Race, Ethnicity and Ancestry

Dictionary definitions
Webster defines race as “a division of mankind possessing traits that are transmissible by descent and sufficient to characterize it as a distinct human type”; ethnicity as “a quality or affiliation relating to large groups of people classed according to common racial, national, tribal, religious, linguistic, or cultural origin or background”; and ancestry as “line of descent.” In other words, race depends on the biological or physical traits of the people from whom you come, ethnicity depends on more non-physical aspects of the people from whom you come, and ancestry depends simply on from whom you come.

Census Bureau explanations
The definitions above correspond, for the most part, with Census Bureau tabulations of three characteristics: ancestry, Hispanic origin, and race. However, the Census Bureau uses the term “ethnicity” when discussing both ancestry and Hispanic origin.

Ancestry
- Ancestry refers to a person’s ethnic origin or descent, “roots,” heritage, or the place of birth of the person, the person’s parents, or their ancestors before their arrival in the United States and includes things like German, Egyptian, or even Cajun.
- Ancestry should not be confused with a person’s place of birth, although a person’s place of birth and ancestry may be the same.
- Although some people consider religious affiliation a component of identity, the ancestry question included in the Census was not designed to collect any information concerning religion. Thus, if a person cited his religion as an answer to the ancestry question, that answer was tabulated in the “other groups” category.

Hispanic origin
In addition to race and ancestry, the Census Bureau collects information on Hispanic origin, which it considers a specific ethnicity. Origin can be viewed as the heritage, nationality group, lineage, or country of birth of the person or the person’s parents or ancestors before their arrival in the United States.

People who identify their origin as Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino may be of any race.

Race
- The concept of race reflects self-identification by people according to the race or races with which they most closely identify.

What is the difference between race, ethnicity, and ancestry?
Race encompasses inherited, characteristic traits. Ethnicity refers to cultural origin. Ancestry is simply a line of descent.

How are data collected?
Usually self-reported in a survey.

Where can I get data on race, ethnicity and ancestry?
The U.S. Census Bureau, various Pennsylvania Departments for particular programs, and others.

When do I use the data:
A single measure of community diversity.