

Census 1926

Guidance Note for Teachers



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Cover image: Sarah MacKessy, of Limerick, arriving in New York on the *SS Aurania* with 10 of her children, 16 March 1926. She was apparently joining her husband Thomas, who had already emigrated. On the 1911 census the MacKessy's were enumerated in Newcastle, Co. Limerick; the family had left Ireland by the time of the next Irish census.

Getty Images, Bettmann

Introduction

The 1926 census offers rich opportunities for children and young people to connect historical evidence at family, local and community levels, and to connect this to broader national and global historical contexts, including patterns of emigration, the changing role of women, post-war social change, and shifts in housing and occupational structures.

At primary level, the 1926 census lesson plans support children to distinguish between primary and secondary sources, to understand change and continuity, and to evaluate the census as a historical source. The post-primary lesson plans provide a foundation for developing skills in source analysis, support the use of digital technology tools, and foster critical thinking on the provisional nature of historical knowledge.

Regardless of contexts, working with real personal data requires careful ethical preparation, and this guidance note is intended to support teachers in planning lessons that are both historically rigorous and sensitive to the needs of all learners.

[Leenane, Co. Galway, c. 1920s.](#)

[National Library of Ireland, L_CAB_00346](#)



Understanding the Nature of the Data

The 1926 census contains personal information about real individuals, some of whom may be the grandparents, great-grandparents, or even living relatives of your learners. Teachers should be mindful that the census data was recorded using the language and classifications of the time.

Language constantly changes. Sometimes this is due to new technologies or the interaction of different cultures, or sometimes because societal values and norms have changed. Terms relating to disability, mental health, 'illegitimacy', institutionalisation or sexuality can reflect attitudes that are now understood to be offensive, reductive or harmful. Encountering such language in a primary source does not make its use in the classroom acceptable without appropriate framing and context. Students should be encouraged to contextualise these words and phrases within their writing, and to put them in their own words when appropriate (for example, when talking about them in class). This can be done by the teacher modelling good practice that emphasises the use of empathetic and person-centred language, and by giving clear guidance to students.

Example: returns for the [Ballinasloe District Lunatic Asylum](#) ↗

Speaking: when speaking about the institution, a teacher could say "Today we are looking at returns for an institution for people experiencing mental health issues. Today we call such places mental health facilities, but at the time they were known by other names, such as 'lunatic asylums'. The people within these institutions were described using language that was acceptable at the time, but in class we will try not to reinforce stereotypes and biases of the time. It's OK if you're unsure; ask about particular words or phrases and we can explore them together."

Writing: if using these words or phrases in handouts or slides, contextualise them so that students can see how it's done. A slide might read 'In the institution known in 1926 as the "Ballinsaloe District Lunatic Asylum", people experiencing poor mental health or who were perceived to be 'deviant' or not conforming to society were referred to as 'inmates' or 'mental patients' in the census returns, reflecting societal attitudes towards mental health at the time'.

Before beginning any census-based activity, teachers should take time to familiarise themselves with the specific records they intend to use, identifying any terminology or personal circumstances that may require sensitive handling.

Ethical Use of Personal Data

Working with census records is an opportunity to introduce children and young people to the ethical dimensions of using personal data. Under the Statistics Act (1993) all census data collected in Ireland from 1926 onwards is kept secret and confidential for 100 years.

When the 1926 census was released in April 2026, there were around 1,200 people still living who had been enumerated in 1926.

Teachers should consider incorporating discussion around the following:

- Why was personal information collected, and who was it intended to serve?
- Why do you think records are kept secret for 100 years?
- How do historical standards of privacy and dignity differ from those we hold today?
- What responsibilities do we carry when we access information about real people and real families?
- How can we engage with difficult or sensitive data respectfully and without judgment?

Pupils should be encouraged to approach census records as historical documents that reflect the social, political and institutional assumptions of their time, rather than objective or neutral documents.

These discussions also support the Junior Cycle's broader emphasis on acquiring the 'big picture' and working with evidence critically, as well as the Senior Cycle requirement that students strengthen critical thinking and research skills by recognising how historical evidence is created, selected and shaped, and understanding that sources reflect the biases and contexts in which they were produced.

For Transition Year students undertaking independent project work (for example, exploring themes such as 'Women's Work in 1926 Ireland' or 'Life in My Town in 1926') ethical engagement with personal data should be treated as an explicit component of the research process, not an afterthought. Any such projects should be underpinned by the TY Programme Statement (NCCA), and aim to contribute to students developing as enriched, engaged and competent learners.

Areas Requiring Particular Care

In all cases, it is recommended that teachers select sample returns in advance of class and encourage students to engage with these. With that in mind, several categories of information recorded in the 1926 census may require especially thoughtful handling:

Household Composition. Family structures recorded in the census may differ significantly from what pupils consider a 'typical' household. Children may encounter records reflecting poverty, overcrowding, single-parent households, children living apart from parents, or other circumstances that could prompt personal reflection or unexpected emotional responses. Where possible, teachers should anticipate these scenarios and plan how they will support pupils who may find such content personally resonant.

Outdated and Offensive Terminology. The census records use classifications and descriptors that reflect the language of 1926. This includes terms relating to disability, mental health conditions, and illegitimacy that are no longer considered appropriate or respectful. Teachers should not reproduce such terms without context, and should prepare pupils in advance by explaining that historical sources often reflect the prejudices of their era. A brief whole-class discussion on this before engaging with the records directly is strongly recommended (see example on p 4).

Institutionalisation and Incarceration. The way information was gathered in the 1926 census makes it easier for people to search for institutions such as asylums, hospitals, prisons, industrial schools or Mother and Baby homes in their local area than with previous census returns. While heads of institutions were instructed to provide only the initials for the people within them, some listed people's full names; the information we have in the census is therefore entirely dependent on the person who filled out the form. This means that, for the first time ever, people in institutions are more visible and students might find that the person they're looking for is in one.

Lesson Planning Recommendations

The 1926 census is a remarkable historical resource, and, used well, it can bring the past to life in ways that textbooks rarely achieve. This guidance is not intended to discourage its use, but to ensure that the experience is handled with the care and thoughtfulness that both the subject matter and your pupils deserve.

When designing lessons that use the 1926 census, the following practical steps are advised:

- Pre-screen some sample records for classroom use, selecting examples that are age/stage appropriate and allow for meaningful historical enquiry without unnecessary exposure to distressing content.
- Set a clear ethical framework at the start of the lesson, establishing shared norms around respect, discretion, and the appropriate use of personal information. This can be framed around the development of a classroom agreement, which should be viewed as a living document and revisited on a regular basis to check in with students. At Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle, this can be framed explicitly as part of the historical method because good historians, like good researchers in any field, handle their sources and their subjects with care.
- Where possible, frame census activities around place-based enquiry rather than family history research. Asking pupils to investigate a local street, townland or community in 1926 is inclusive of all students regardless of their family background or heritage, and often generates equally rich historical insight.
- Prepare pupils for what they might encounter, including the possibility of encountering language that today might be regarded as offensive, unexpected family circumstances, or records relating to institutionalisation. Forewarned pupils are better equipped to respond thoughtfully rather than reactively.
- Create a safe and discreet opt-out pathway for any pupil who discovers information that is personally sensitive or distressing without drawing attention to them by making it explicit at the start of the lesson that if a pupil finds a census returns that distresses them, they can choose a different return to focus on.
- While we recommend not to engage in family history research to ensure that searching the census is an inclusive activity for all students, some teachers might wish to do so with their classes. Those teachers should be particularly attentive when pupils are researching their own family records, as this carries a higher risk of unexpected or sensitive discoveries.

Further Reading

Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (2019)

[Teaching controversial issues toolkit](#)

CDETBC Curriculum Development Unit (2012) [Tackling controversial issues in the citizenship education classroom](#)

Council of Europe (2017) [Managing controversy: Developing a strategy for handling controversy and teaching controversial issues in schools – A self-reflection tool for school leaders and senior managers](#)

Council of Europe (2021) [Learning how to handle controversial issues in schools and other education settings: A good practice guide](#)

Council of Europe (2015) [Teaching controversial issues through education for democratic citizenship and human rights](#)

Learning for Justice (2023) [Advocating for teaching honest history.](#)

National Museum for World Cultures (2018). Words Matter: *An unfinished guide to word choices in the cultural sector.* <https://www.materialculture.nl/en/publications/words-matter>

NCCA (2025). [Mother and Baby homes resources for Junior Cycle History, Civic, Social and Political Education, and English.](#)

Oxfam (2018) [Teaching controversial issues: A guide for teachers](#)

Phillips, Ian, (2009) 'Teaching sensitive and controversial history' in Aktekin, Semih, Harnett, Penelope, Ozturk, Mustafa, Smart, Dean (eds.). *Teaching History and Social Studies for Multicultural Europe*. Ankara.

Stradling, Robert (2003). *Multiperspectivity in history teaching: A guide for teachers.* Council of Europe.

The History Association (2007). [Teaching Emotive and Controversial History 3–19.](#) Department for Education and Skills, UK.

Excerpt from census Form B,
Marlborough Street, Dublin.

National Archives, STAT/1/10/52/
Marlborough Street/B/2

		(Col. 8)	(Col. 9)	(Column 10)	(Col. 11)	(Col. 12)	(Col. 13)
21							
	John Hayes.				5.5.26	20	
	Mary Bolger.				60	21	
1	John Ryan.				60	22	
4	Charles Malone				60	23	
	Jane Maher				60	24	
	Rose Reilly				60	25	
	Thomas Rochford				6.5.26	26	3
	William Walsh				60	27	7
	Malachy Creed				60	28	3
	Laurancee Murphy				60	29	2
8	Thomas Finlay				60	30	3
	Terence Reilly				60	31	1
	Simon Reilly				60	32	1
	John Owens				60	33	1
34							63.8

I hereby certify that the foregoing Return is correct, according to the best of
and belief.



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together in Col. 10 thus—John Jones } and the figure 1 entered in Col. 10
Peter Murray } in col. 16.