Disclaimer
The information in this research guide is intended to assist patrons with their legal research and is in no way intended to replace the counsel of an Attorney. Any decisions about how to proceed must be determined by the patron. The library staff can recommend and refer you to print and web-based resources that will help you find answers to your law-related questions. The staff at the Law Library for San Bernardino County cannot explain or interpret the law itself and we are not permitted to give legal advice.

One of the most common questions asked is “What is the difference between a primary and secondary source?”

This guide is aimed at explaining the difference between primary and secondary resources, and how it applies to your research and the law library.

Primary Sources
The Law itself:
Federal Law, State Law, etc.

Secondary Sources
Materials about the law: Encyclopedias, Dictionaries, Journals, etc.

Your Research
• Base your research on the primary source
• Use the secondary sources to help you understand primary material

“primary authority. Authority that issues directly from a law-making body; legislation and the reports of litigated cases.”
-Black’s Law Dictionary, 8th Edition (p.143)

“secondary authority. Authority that explains the law but does not itself establish it, such as a treatise, annotation, or law-review article.”
-Black’s Law Dictionary, 8th Edition (p.143)