

April 29, 2009

Mr. SCOTT of Virginia: I thank the gentleman for yielding.

Mr. Speaker, bias crimes are disturbingly prevalent and pose a significant threat to the full participation of all Americans in our democratic society. Despite the deep impact of hate violence on communities, current law limits Federal jurisdiction over hate crimes to incidents directed against individuals only on the basis of race, religion, color or national origin and only when the victim is targeted because he or she is engaged in a federally protected activity, such as voting. Further, the statutes do not permit Federal involvement in a range of cases where crimes are motivated by bias against the victim's perceived sexual orientation, gender, gender identity or disability.

We need to change the law so that the Federal Government will have the authority to be involved in investigating and in prosecuting these cases when the State authorities cannot or will not do so.

Mr. Speaker, the bill is narrowly drawn. It only applies to bias-motivated, violent crime, and it has specific protections to ensure that it does not impinge on public speech, religious expression or on writing in any way. In fact, the only way that expressions could involve the defendant in this crime is if the language were such that it would already qualify as something like inciting a riot or other violent crimes.

Mr. Speaker, law enforcement authorities and civic leaders have learned that a failure to address the problem of bias crime can cause a seemingly isolated incident to fester into widespread tension that can cause damage to the social fabric of a community.

This problem cuts across party lines, and so I hope we will pass the bill on a bipartisan basis just as we did last year.