

U.S. House Passes 'Hate Crimes' Bill

The bill broadens the definition of hate crimes to include violence provoked by bias against sexual orientation, gender identity or disability.



In a 237-180 vote, the U.S. House of Representatives on Thursday passed a bill that broadens the definition of hate crimes to include violence provoked by bias against sexual orientation, gender identity or disability. The bill, called the Local Law Enforcement Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 2007 [H.R. 1592], will allow federal law enforcement officials to help prosecute sex- and gender-biased crimes at the local level. Similar legislation is now working its way through the U.S. Senate. Conservative critics strongly oppose the legislation, saying such laws threaten the free speech of religious leaders who publicly denounce homosexuality. In a report to Congress, Glen Lavy, senior counsel at the Alliance Defense Fund, stated, "H.R. 1592 would criminalize thoughts, feelings and beliefs." Conservatives use as an example the pastor in Sweden who, under the country's "hate crimes" law, received a one-month jail sentence in 2005 for denouncing homosexuality from his pulpit. President Bush has indicated he would veto the bill. Meanwhile, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), which traditionally champions free speech rights, has come out in strong support of H.R. 1592, claiming a problem in a portion of the bill that it thought would "chill constitutionally protected speech" had been sufficiently revised.