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Housing

'He Can Bury You Alive': Immigrant Tenants Allege Abuse, Fearmongering from East Harlem Landlord

Rent-stabilized tenants in East Harlem claim that their landlord Steven Croman is using their immigration status as a tool of intimidation.

MAURIZIO GUERRERO
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LIGHT SHINES THROUGH A WINDOW THAT DOES NOT WORK PROPERLY IN AN APARTMENT BUILDING WHERE TENANTS REPORT MAINTENANCE ISSUES AND PEST INFESTATIONS IN NEW YORK. (AP PHOTO/ANDRES KUDACKI)



In April 2025, Pavia saw two men wearing vests with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) insignias knocking on the front door of their East Harlem apartment through a doorbell camera. They did not open the door.

Later that day, it appeared that Steven Croman, the owner of the building himself — who has a current portfolio of [116 buildings in the city](#), according to the NYC Housing Data Coalition — called one of Pavia’s family members and left a voicemail: “This is Croman. Call me back.”

They didn’t.

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Pavia, who has lived in their apartment for about 25 years, believed the call was connected to the ICE agents’ recent visit. Since 2009, when [Centennial Properties NY](#) acquired that building, Pavia said that Steven Croman ([owner, CEO, and president](#)) and his employees have never stopped harassing their family. It is a modus operandi that has been [amply documented](#) by some of Croman’s other rent-stabilized [tenants](#) as well.

“When Croman bought the building, the nightmares began,” said Pavia. For days, weeks, or months at a time, the family went without

heat, hot water, electricity, or cooking gas, and endured constant leaks that led to the bathroom ceiling's collapse.

"Croman is a bad man; he's terrible," Pavia said. "He's someone to be afraid of."

"When Croman bought the building, the nightmares began."

—*Paiva, East Harlem resident and tenant of Steven Croman*

Documented spoke with nine rent-stabilized tenants in five of the [13 buildings](#) Croman owns in East Harlem, from East 100th St. to 119th St. and from 1st Ave. to Madison Ave. All are noncitizens born in Ecuador or in Mexico. For each tenant, only one of their family surnames is being used to protect them from retaliation.

After President Donald Trump took office again in January 2025, tenants claim that many of them were asked about their immigration status, something they all interpreted as another intimidation tactic by Croman.

"They called me last year from Centennial Properties on different numbers — because they continually change them — they asked me: 'Do you have papers?'" said Bravo, who has lived in their apartment since before Croman acquired the building.

Croman declined to comment on a detailed set of questions sent by Documented.

Croman's firm bought buildings with rent-stabilized apartments and, immediately afterward, began displacing tenants to convert units into highly profitable market rentals, [according to the New York Attorney General's office](#). He single-handedly destabilized 618 units, 32.5% of his portfolio, [according to public documents](#) analyzed by the nonprofit JustFix. The most affected building, on East 100th St. in East Harlem, lost 80 stabilized apartments in the past 10 years.

Prior to June 14, 2019, landlords [could automatically](#) claim a 20% "vacancy bonus" added to the legally registered rent whenever a unit turned over between tenants. Once the rent reached a [certain threshold](#), set at \$2,774 per month in 2019, apartments were automatically deregulated. Now, landlords cannot increase rents beyond the city's established limits after vacancies, unless the units are market rentals.

The legal loophole that allowed Croman to jack up rents by renovating vacant apartments and then deregulating those units [was closed](#) in 2019. Still, tenants say Croman continues to harass rent-stabilized renters.

Take the case of Bravo, who took Centennial Properties NY to court to compel them to finish repairing their shower — a job started in February 2024. After a court order, Croman's employees completed the job about two years later, in January 2026. The retaliation, however, was much swifter.

Since February, half of Bravo's apartment has had no electricity, they said. Previously, the family had waited six years for a window to be fixed and, like the rest of the building, had lived without cooking gas for about 18 months. Bravo said they have informed Centennial Properties NY of the building's problems and have filed complaints with 311 and the city's Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD), to no avail.

The feeling of impotence is prevalent among Croman's East Harlem tenants.

“No matter where we call, it’s the same thing. Nothing gets fixed,” said Baeza, who lives in a different building than Bravo. According to León, a tenant in another property, the managers who occasionally show up tell rent-stabilized renters: “You are paying very little in rent. You should not complain.”

An infamous landlord

Across decades, Croman built his real estate empire by turning tenant harassment into a [profitable business model](#), according to The Village Voice. As early as 1998, Croman was already one of the city’s [most notorious landlords](#). To evict tenants, Croman employed a three-pronged strategy, according to [a 2016 Bloomberg analysis](#): file frivolous lawsuits to wear tenants down; deploy bruising enforcers to intimidate them physically; and create conditions so squalid and unsafe that residents leave.

By 2017, [Croman was sentenced](#) to one year in jail for fraudulently refinancing loans and committing tax fraud, and was required [to pay \\$8 million](#) into a tenants’ fund — the largest-ever settlement with an individual landlord — for harassing rent-regulated residents and engaging in other illegal conduct. Seven years later, Croman was at odds with the state government again.

In 2024, Governor Kathy Hochul [fined Croman](#) more than half a million dollars for leasing rent-regulated units for short-term stays and for overcharging tenants.

“Croman is worse than ever. Jail taught him nothing,” said Cynthia Chaffee, a Centennial Properties NY tenant and co-founder of the [Stop Croman Coalition](#), which has documented the landlord’s activities for the past two decades. “He is running a criminal enterprise; that’s what it is.”

“Croman is worse than ever. Jail taught him nothing.”

—*Cynthia Chaffee, a Centennial Properties NY tenant and co-founder of the Stop Croman Coalition*

In June, New York Assemblymember Linda Rosenthal said as much [to the news outlet W42ST](#): “He continues to be a terrible landlord who harasses his tenants, doesn’t provide upkeep of buildings. People have to live in unacceptable conditions.”

Toledo has lived for more than 30 years in a building Croman acquired in 2013. In 2022, Toledo decided to withhold rent from Croman and Centennial Properties NY after the landlord failed to repair issues in their apartment and employees constantly harassed them into buying them out of their lease. Tenants said that Croman and his employees offered up to \$20,000 to have them vacate their rent-stabilized units.

This July, the court ruled in Toledo’s favor, which required them to only pay about half of the owed rents to Centennial Properties NY. Croman, however, quickly went on the offensive, which for Toledo felt like retaliation. His employees changed the lock on Toledo’s door, blocked the apartment’s windows with planks, and posted a note on the front door informing the family that entering their home would be illegal.

“Only seven days after we settled in court, Croman shut me out of my apartment,” Toledo said. After finding a place for the family to spend the night, they went to court. Croman’s attorney said in court that they had made a mistake and that Toledo should not have been locked out of their home.

Because of the frequent court hearings, Toledo has lost two jobs. They have experienced anxiety and insomnia. Last year, Centennial Properties NY employees also asked them about their immigration status.

“Croman is a master of psychological torture,” said Chaffee. “He really knows how to get to people.”

Displacement for profit

Many of the longtime residents of Croman’s East Harlem buildings, mostly Latinos, have left, current tenants told Documented. They were intimidated or accepted the buyout for their lease. Those who have weathered Croman’s harassment have paid a steep price.

One of Croman’s eviction tools is known as “[construction as harassment](#)” — when demolition and renovations leave buildings filled with toxic dust, collapsed ceilings and no cooking gas, tenants are forced to leave. If they stay, they could endure [long-term health](#) consequences.

Bravo’s daughter was born around the time when Croman began a major renovation that would last almost five years, according to neighbors. Despite the scale of the job, the NYC Department of Buildings has no record of it, and as a result, there is no documentation of tests done to detect lead and asbestos, which were likely present in Croman’s East Harlem buildings, built in the 1910s and 1920s.

“They removed all the stairs, so we had to climb very carefully, my partner with the newborn and I with a stroller,” Bravo recalls. Their baby was then diagnosed with asthma. “I believe the demolition affected my child, who breathed in all that dust from those old materials.”

Tenants in other buildings also reported respiratory issues after years-long renovations. There were other consequences as well. “Croman

crippled me years ago,” Chaffee said. “He took the railings away, and I went flying down the stairs.” Chaffee now needs crutches to walk.

“Croman crippled me years ago. He took the railings away, and I went flying down the stairs.”

—*Chaffee, East Harlem resident and tenant of Steven Croman*

Croman seems to be focusing on tenants in [preferential rent units](#) — [about 31%](#) of the city’s rent-stabilized apartments — [whose rents](#) are below the legal maximum for a stabilized unit. Preferential rents cannot be raised to the stabilized limit until a tenant moves out.

Ochoa has lived in a preferential-rent apartment for 25 years. Like many of Croman’s tenants, they have repeatedly battled him in court. Ochoa has always won, but that has not stopped Croman’s lawsuits. Centennial Properties NY is now claiming Ochoa does not have the legal right to live in their apartment. “I have to bring all the documents to prove the judge otherwise,” they said.

Croman might be eager to obtain cash. He is seeking to [avoid foreclosure](#) of his Upper East Side mansion — once a six-story multifamily building with 23 rent-stabilized apartments — valued at \$53 million. He may also [lose part of his empire](#) as he faces about 30 foreclosure lawsuits totaling more than \$300 million. Croman’s [own father is suing him](#) for “rampant fraudulent mismanagement.”

To keep the cash flowing, Croman seems to be heavily relying on keeping tenants’ security deposits. The tenants interviewed for this

article agreed that the turnover rate among the buildings' residents is astounding, as services such as heating and hot water, and sometimes rodent infestations, are prevalent.

Consider the stats: according to HPD, one of Croman's East Harlem buildings has [195 open violations](#), which is nearly seven times the average — 28.1 — for a building in East Harlem.

The discussion platform Reddit has [several threads](#) referring to Centennial Properties NY's mismanagement, the most recent titled: "[Beware: Centennial Properties Scam](#)," which warned in May that the company "creates a system that makes it nearly impossible for you to collect your security deposit." The [most recent Yelp reviews](#), from June and July, all mention stolen security deposits.

Given Croman's track record, Mayor Mamdani's administration may take away part of Croman's portfolio under foreclosure as part of [the initiative "Fix the City."](#) An HPD spokesperson [told City Limits](#) that "several organizations are being brought in to lead a preservation effort for Croman's portfolio." The spokesperson said that HPD plans to meet with a lender to determine next steps.

"Croman is a very dangerous man," Ochoa said, after having him as a landlord for 17 years. "If he sees you have a dollar, he can bury you alive to take that dollar away from you. He would not think twice."

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