

Chinatown divided: Luxury developers battle tenants and small-business owners

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High-end development is delivering a beatdown to Chinatown's low-income residents and small-business owners, two advocacy groups are complaining.

Despite the sharp economic downturn, luxury development has been strong in the lower Manhattan nabe. Researchers found 26 upscale residential buildings in the area, 25 new hotels and 118 new boutiques and cafes.

"While people believe Chinatown is immune to gentrification, our research shows unregulated private development is threatening low-income residents," said Esther Wang of the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence. The group conducted the newly released study with the Urban Justice Center.

Three quarters of the residents who responded to the survey said they had been harassed by landlords trying to drive them out of their rental apartments.

Some claimed landlords refused to give them leases or accept their rent checks. And some said building owners had offered bribes to get them to move, or took them to housing court without cause to try to evict them.

Three quarters of the residents surveyed alleged the buildings they live in had serious housing code violations, such as no heat or running water, collapsing ceilings and gas leaks.

"Chinatown was a very poor neighborhood, and we worked really hard," Zhi Qin Zheng said in Mandarin through a translator. "Because of this, now our community is attractive to these developers."

Zheng, 54, lives in a Chinatown building whose tenants recently sued their landlord, alleging harassment.

Three quarters of the small-business owners queried in the survey have suffered rent hikes they say jeopardize their survival.

And almost half of the small-business owners surveyed said they're thinking about moving out of Chinatown.