

RESEARCH REPORT

Why Web Accessibility Is Getting Worse Despite Better Tools and Clearer Rules

In early 2026, web accessibility experienced a notable regression, with an increase in detectable homepage failures and the average number of errors, effectively undoing two years of prior progress. This downturn occurred amidst a surge in web page complexity and the consistent prevalence of six major error categories. Concurrently, while 79% of professionals surveyed reported using AI to enhance digital accessibility, particularly for tasks like generating captions and alt text, the quality of these AI-driven outputs varied. These trends unfold against a backdrop of evolving regulatory requirements, including the Department of Justice's 2024 final rule updating Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act to mandate accessible web content and mobile applications for state and local governments. The legal environment continues to be dynamic, as evidenced by a recent Department of Housing and Urban Development memo on emotional support animals and a Department of Justice statement opposing an accessibility class action settlement.

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By Accibly Editorial Team · ⌚ 6 min read

| Executive Summary

In early 2026, web accessibility experienced a notable regression, with an increase in detectable homepage failures and the average number of errors, effectively undoing two years of prior progress. This downturn occurred amidst a surge in web page complexity and the consistent prevalence of six major error categories. Concurrently, while 79% of professionals surveyed reported using AI to enhance digital accessibility, particularly for tasks like generating captions and alt text, the quality of these AI-driven outputs varied. These trends unfold against a backdrop of evolving regulatory requirements, including the Department of Justice's 2024 final rule updating Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act to mandate accessible web content and mobile applications for state and local governments. The legal environment continues to be dynamic, as evidenced by a recent Department of Housing and Urban Development memo on emotional support animals and a Department of Justice statement opposing an accessibility class action settlement.

A Reversal in Web Accessibility Progress

After a period of incremental improvement, web accessibility experienced a significant setback in early 2026. Data indicates that the percentage of homepages with detectable accessibility failures increased, climbing from 94.8% to 95.9% in February 2026. This rise was accompanied by a 10.1% increase in the average number of detected errors per homepage, effectively erasing two years of prior progress and returning web accessibility to approximately its 2024 standing.

Persistent Challenges and Growing Complexity

A core set of six error categories continues to dominate the landscape of automatically detected web accessibility issues, accounting for 96% of all errors in a recent sample. Notably, four of these six categories became more common in 2026, indicating persistent, unresolved challenges. Adding to the complexity, the average homepage structure has grown significantly, containing 1,437 elements in February 2026, a 22.5% increase within a single year and nearly double the figure from 2019. Similarly, the use of ARIA attributes increased by 27% during the same period, reflecting a more intricate web environment that can introduce new accessibility hurdles if not managed carefully.

| The Double-Edged Sword of AI in Accessibility

Organizations are increasingly integrating Artificial Intelligence into their digital accessibility efforts. A 2026 survey of over 500 professionals in software development, quality assurance, product management, compliance, and accessibility found that 79% are using AI to enhance the accessibility of their websites and applications. AI code assist is being utilized to address existing issues and develop new accessible features. Additionally, AI's capacity to rapidly generate captions, transcripts, and alternative text for images is proving beneficial. However, the survey also noted that the quality of AI-generated outputs can vary significantly, suggesting that while AI offers promising tools, human oversight and quality control remain crucial.

| Evolving Regulatory Landscape

The regulatory environment for digital accessibility continues to evolve, providing clearer mandates for compliance. On April 24, 2024, the Department of Justice published a final rule updating its regulations for Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). This rule establishes specific requirements to ensure that web content and mobile applications provided by state and local governments are accessible to individuals with disabilities.

Official government websites, identifiable by a .gov domain or https:// in the URL, are key sources for such regulatory information. Beyond the federal mandates for government sites, other areas of accessibility law are also seeing shifts. For example, a May 22, 2026, enforcement memorandum from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) indicated a shift in how Emotional Support Animals (ESAs) are treated under the Fair Housing Act, moving closer to the treatment of ESAs in places of public accommodation. Furthermore, the Department of Justice has demonstrated continued scrutiny in legal proceedings, as seen in its February 2026 Statement of Interest opposing a proposed settlement in a federal class action lawsuit concerning website accessibility, citing concerns over access improvements and disproportionate attorney compensation, and even the inaccessibility of the settlement website itself.

| Conclusion: Addressing the Path Forward

The recent data illustrating a regression in web accessibility progress underscores the ongoing, multifaceted challenges faced by organizations. While regulatory bodies like the Department of Justice are setting clear standards for government entities and AI tools offer new avenues for remediation, the persistent nature of common errors and the increasing complexity of the digital landscape demand sustained effort. Ensuring genuinely inclusive digital experiences requires not only adhering to mandates but also consistently auditing, adapting to technological shifts, and critically evaluating the quality of automated solutions.

| Key Findings

KEY FINDINGS

In February 2026, the share of homepages with detectable accessibility failures rose from 94.8% to 95.9%, and the average number of detected errors per homepage increased by 10.1%, erasing two years of progress.

Six categories of errors consistently account for 96% of automatically detected errors in WebAIM's sample, with four of these becoming more common in 2026.

The average homepage contained 1,437 elements in February 2026, a 22.5% increase in one year, and nearly double the 2019 figure; ARIA attributes also grew by 27% in the same period.

79% of surveyed software development, QA, product, compliance, and accessibility professionals reported using AI to improve digital accessibility in their organizations.

AI tools are being used to address existing issues, develop accessible features, and generate captions, transcripts, and alt text, but the quality of AI outputs can vary significantly.

On April 24, 2024, the Department of Justice published a final rule updating Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act, establishing specific requirements for accessible web content and mobile applications provided by state and local governments.

Evidence

Claim analysis available

68 statements support this investigation, drawn from 14 sources.

KEY EVIDENCE

OBSERVED · 90% confidence · March 8, 2024

A .gov website belongs to an official government organization in the United States.

[Source](#)

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) or https:// means you've safely connected to the .gov website. Share sensitive information only on official, secure websites. [Source](#)

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Fact Sheet: New Rule on the Accessibility of Web Content and Mobile Apps Provided by State and Local Governments [Source](#)

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On April 24, 2024, the Federal Register published the Department of Justice's (Department) final rule updating its regulations for Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The final rule has specific requirements about how to ensure that web content and mobile applications (apps) are accessible to people with disabilities. [Source](#)

OBSERVED · 90% confidence

As a library, NLM provides access to scientific literature. Inclusion in an NLM database does not imply endorsement of, or agreement with, [Source](#)

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| Analysis

The digital accessibility landscape in early 2026 presents a complex picture of progress and regression. Despite years of efforts to improve web accessibility, evidenced by a previous downward trend in detectable failures, a significant reversal occurred in February 2026. The increase in both the percentage of non-compliant homepages and the average number of errors suggests that the challenges to achieving digital inclusivity are persistent and evolving. This regression coincides with a substantial increase in the complexity of web pages, marked by a rise in the number of elements and ARIA attributes. While these technical advancements can theoretically enhance accessibility, they may also introduce new vectors for errors if not implemented correctly. The fact that a small number of error categories continue to dominate suggests that fundamental issues remain unaddressed across a broad spectrum of websites. In parallel, the adoption of Artificial Intelligence in accessibility efforts is widespread, with a large majority of

professionals using AI for tasks such as generating alternative text and captions. This indicates a proactive approach to leveraging technology for accessibility. However, the acknowledged variability in AI output quality poses a challenge, suggesting that AI is not a panacea and requires careful oversight to ensure it genuinely improves, rather than compromises, accessibility. Adding to this dynamic environment are ongoing regulatory developments. The Department of Justice's 2024 rule clarifying web and mobile app accessibility requirements for state and local governments under Title II of the ADA establishes a clear legal standard, emphasizing the imperative for public sector entities to ensure digital access. This regulatory push provides a framework for compliance even as the broader trends in web accessibility show a decline. Other legal activities, such as the Department of Housing and Urban Development's updated stance on emotional support animals and the Department of Justice's intervention in a website accessibility class action, underscore the active and evolving nature of accessibility law beyond federal websites.

Practical Takeaways

Organizations should regularly audit their web and mobile content for accessibility, paying particular attention to the six consistently problematic error categories.

Teams should consider the increasing complexity of web design and the proliferation of elements when planning accessibility strategies, allocating resources to address these challenges proactively.

When integrating AI tools for accessibility, it is crucial to implement robust quality assurance processes to verify the accuracy and effectiveness of AI-generated captions, alt text, and other outputs.

State and local government entities must ensure their web content and mobile applications comply with the Department of Justice's updated Title II ADA regulations, which mandate specific accessibility requirements.

Legal and compliance teams should stay informed of evolving accessibility jurisprudence, including federal regulations and court interpretations, to mitigate potential risks and ensure adherence to current standards.

| Source Appendix

1. [Fact Sheet: New Rule on the Accessibility of Web Content and Mobile Apps Provided by State and Local Governments | ADA.gov](#)
ada.gov
2. [Conducting Accessible Research: Including People With Disabilities in Public Health, Epidemiological, and Outcomes Studies - PMC](#)
pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov
3. [September 2026 Accessibility Events - by Laura Wisiak](#)
a11ynews.substack.com
4. [State of Web Accessibility 2026: Report & Statistics](#)
accessibility.build
5. [Accessibility Lawsuit Tracker 2026: ADA Litigation Data](#)
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6. [ADA Title III | Disability Law for Businesses | Seyfarth Shaw](#)
adatitleiii.com
7. [DOJ Throws Wrench Into Proposed ADA Website Accessibility Class Settlement | ADA Title III](#)
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8. [The State of Digital Quality in Accessibility 2026 - Applause](#)
applause.com
9. [Disability Inclusion Data, Research & Benchmarking | Disability:IN](#)
disabilityin.org
10. [Federal Register :: Extension of Compliance Dates for Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Disability; Accessibility of Web Information and Services of State and Local Government](#)

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[federalregister.gov](#)

11. [Digital Accessibility: What Public Leaders Need to Know for 2026 - PRISM](#)

[prismrisk.gov](#)

12. [New digital accessibility requirements in 2026 - PublicCEO](#)

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13. [Enforcement Actions | DOJ Settlements & Cases | WSC](#)

[wsc.us.org](#)

UPDATE HISTORY

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HOW THIS ARTICLE WAS BUILT

13 sources reviewed.

2 source categories represented (Advocacy, Government).

Evidence last reviewed September 1, 2026.

Claims examined: 15. Supported: 15. Qualified: 0. Contested: 0. Unsupported: 0.

Independently corroborated claims: 3.

Material claims needing additional corroboration: 1.

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