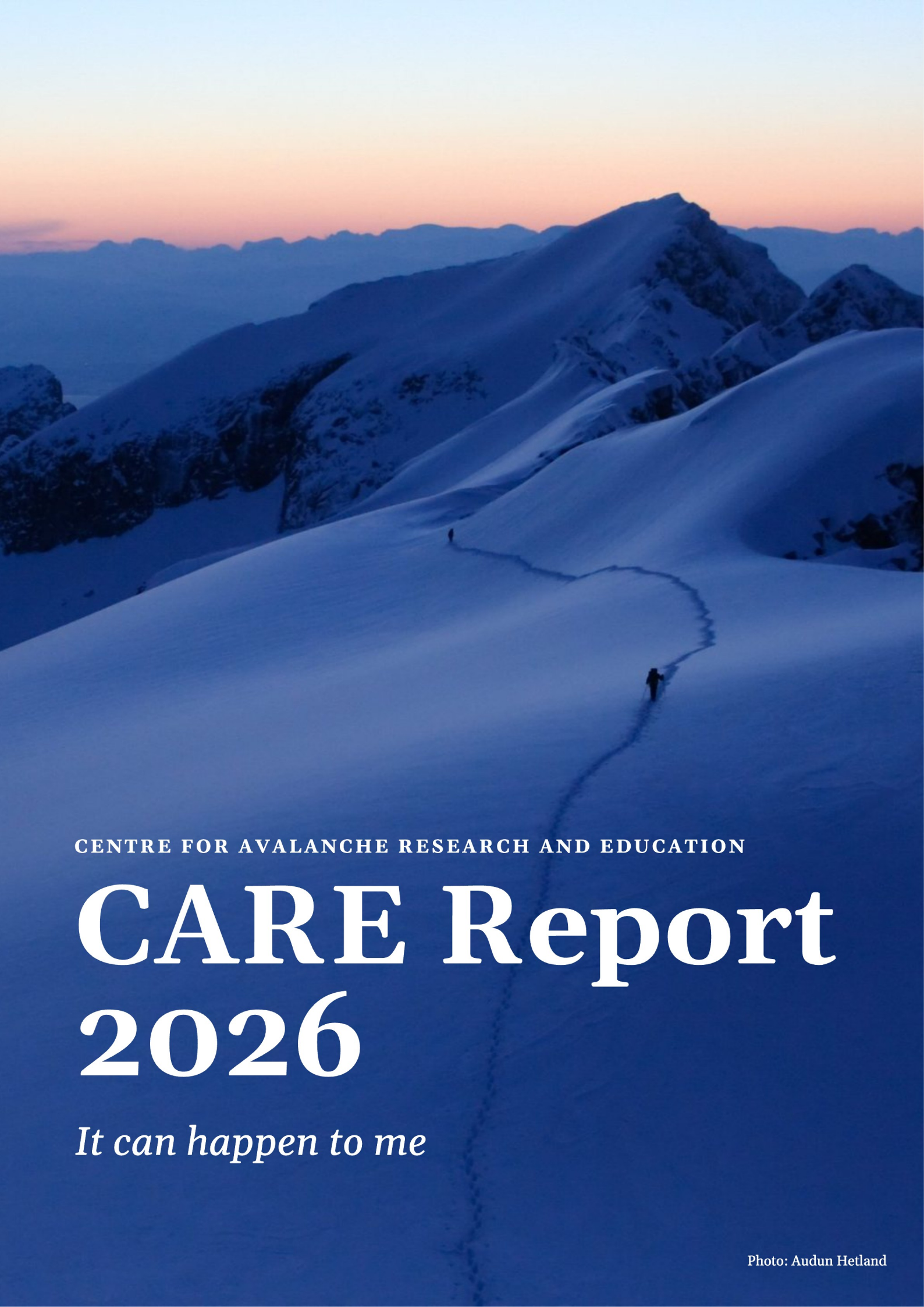


CENTRE FOR AVALANCHE RESEARCH AND EDUCATION

CARE Report 2026

It can happen to me

Photo: Audun Hetland



Photo: Audun Hetland

Introduction

You are standing at the top of a line, deciding whether to ski down. The terrain is fun and the snow looks good. But there is always a chance the slope will slide. It's worth the risk, you might be thinking. And most of the time nothing happens. Serious avalanche accidents are, luckily, not very common. But when it does go wrong, it can turn life completely upside down.

The reach of an accident stretches far beyond you and me, standing at the top with our skis. When someone dies, many are left behind. Families and friends are left with loss and grief. Rescuers, volunteers and professionals alike, sometimes have to put themselves in danger to save others, and are left with experiences that leave lasting marks.

We often think that we either survive or die. But sometimes the outcome lands somewhere in between. A life, but not the life you had. A life with serious injuries. A life in a new body that won't obey, or is full of pain. A life with trauma and anxiety. Those who live it often disappear from public view, and from our network as skiers. They can no longer come along.

Some find a renewed gratitude for life and feel they have been given it as a gift. Others feel the loss of friends and identity, and experience life as chaotic and demanding. Because who are you if you can no longer ski? And what happens to you when the thing you loved most, those great days on skis, becomes a source of fear?

For several years we have talked to people who have been involved in serious accidents. Those who were caught, those doing the rescue and those who were left behind. And we try to understand what we can learn, so it doesn't happen again.

We know this first-hand. Andrea was caught in an avalanche that nearly killed her in 2014. Audun's wife Rebecca was seriously injured in an avalanche almost 20 years ago.

Worth the risk?

Many who have been through a serious accident will disagree, and it can hurt to hear others say it. Because if you haven't felt it in your own body, what do you really know about the risk?

That is why we wanted to learn from those who have lived through what we all fear. We want to know what it does to their understanding of risk, how they assess avalanche danger if they return to skiing, and what a serious accident does to a life.

But first we need the bigger picture. How many are actually caught? How many know someone who was? Since 2020, more than 4,000 people have answered the CARE panel surveys. The panel attracts people with a strong interest in avalanches, and likely many with avalanche experience. So the numbers do not tell us how common incidents are among all skiers. But they show how close avalanches come to many of us. Then we turn to the stories behind the numbers.

We are deeply grateful and humbled by everyone who has chosen to share their stories with us. In every conversation lie lessons for you and me. Lessons we can take with us when we stand there at the top.

Because we want people out in the mountains. We want people to have fantastic experiences on skis and boards. But most of all, we want everyone to come home in one piece.



Audun Hetland
Photo: Marianne Knudsen



Andrea Mannberg
Photo: Audun Hetland

CARE centre leaders

The bigger picture

The CARE panel has run for six seasons, and we are thrilled to have all of you aboard. You are a broad group, with a lot of experience in the winter mountains.

4,043
people in the CARE panel since 2020

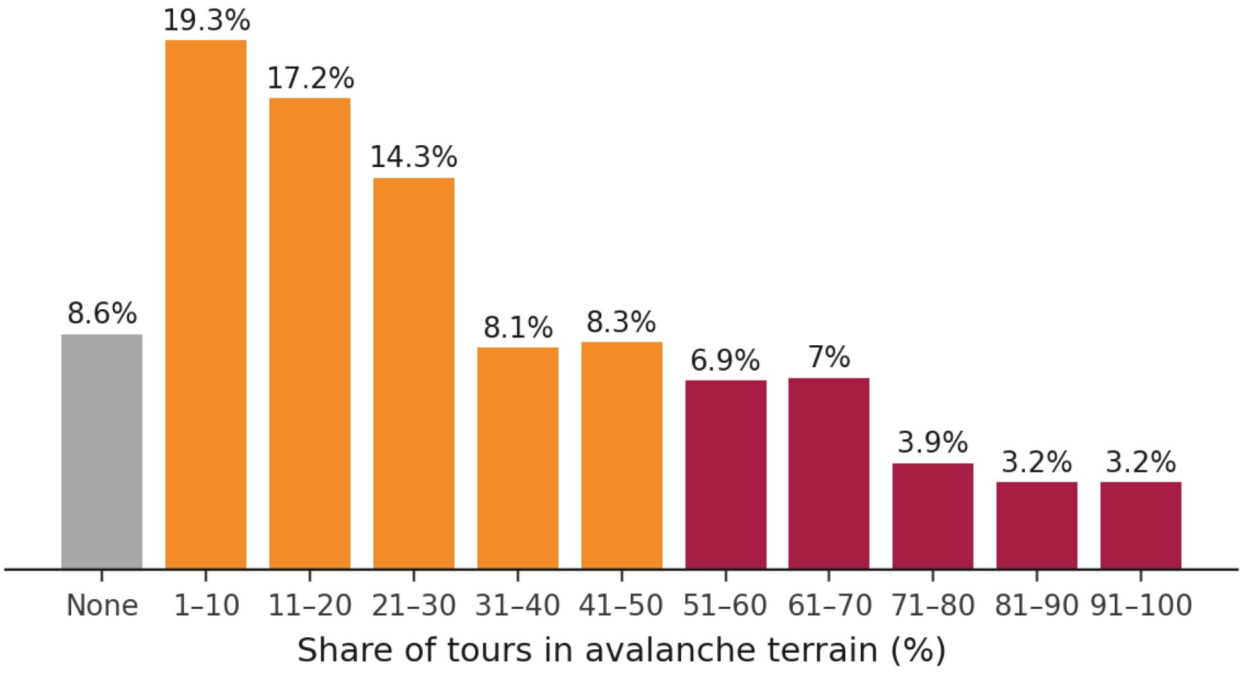
72%
men, 28% women

37
average age, from 16 to 76

15
years of experience or more for half of you

Where you ski

Seven in ten say backcountry skiing is their main activity, and half of you skied more than 20 days last season. Almost all of you go into avalanche terrain. Only 8.6 percent say they never do. One in four spend more than half of their tours there.

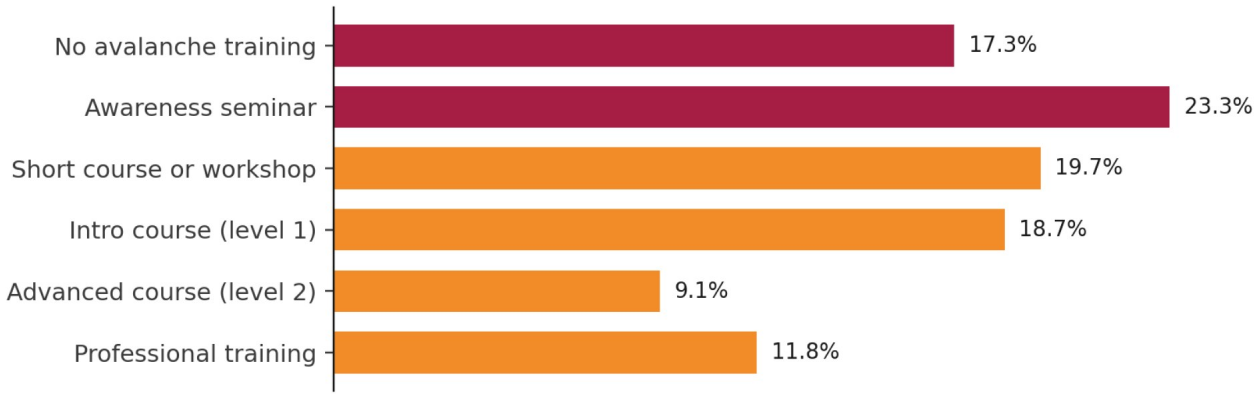


Share of your tours that go into avalanche terrain. Red: more than half of all tours.

What you know

4 in 10 have no avalanche training, or an awareness seminar as their highest level

Yet on a six-point scale, two in three rate their own avalanche skills at 4 or higher. Level 4 means you understand the different avalanche problems, know how to respond to them with your terrain choices, and have basic skills in finding weak layers in the snow.



Highest level of avalanche training.

You do use resources when planning. 97 percent use the regional avalanche forecast and 93 percent check the weather. 83 percent use inclination maps, and three in four talk to someone they trust before they go. Only 17 percent use terrain exposure maps such as ATES (Avalanche Terrain Exposure Scale) when they plan a route.

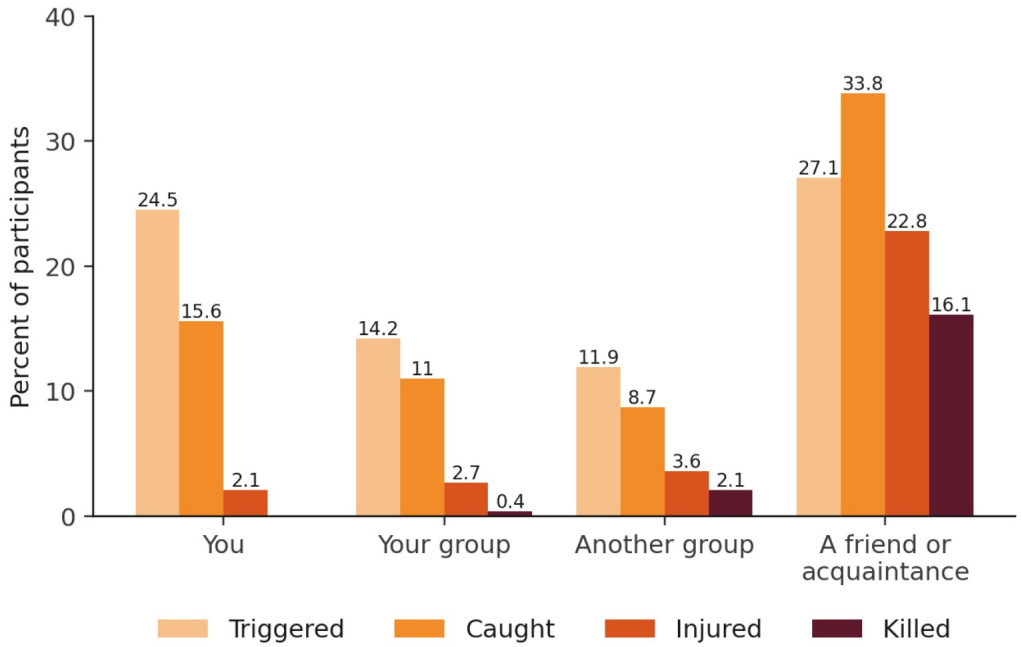
How many get caught

Avalanches are not something that happens to other people.

74% have experienced an avalanche incident, themselves or through someone close to them

Of the 2,132 of you who joined the panel from 2021 and answered these questions, only 26 percent have no experience with avalanche incidents. The other 74 percent do. The CARE panel is not a random sample of skiers, and people with avalanche experience are probably more likely to join. Even so, this is a very high number.

One in four have triggered an avalanche themselves. 16 percent have been caught, and 2 percent injured. But the largest circle is the people around us. 58 percent have a friend or acquaintance who has been involved. 16 percent have lost a friend or acquaintance in an avalanche.



Your experiences with avalanche incidents in life, from triggering to being killed. Percent of 2,132 participants who joined in 2021 or later. The numbers may overstate the share somewhat: some may have ticked several boxes for the same incident, for example if someone in their group triggered an avalanche and was also caught.



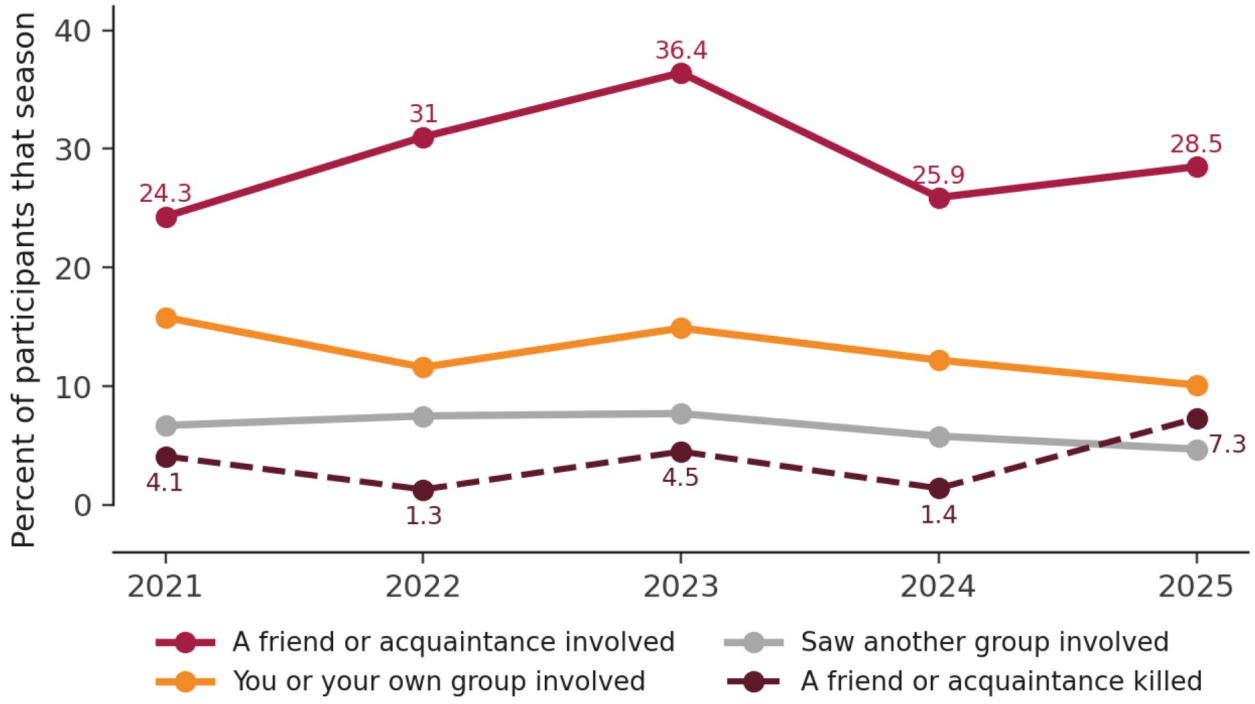
Photo: Amund Vaagland

And it happens every season

Each winter, between 10 and 16 percent of you report that you or someone in your own group triggered or were caught in an avalanche. Between a quarter and a third know someone who was. Avalanches come close to a lot of people.

Last season, 7.3 percent had a friend or acquaintance killed.

That is the highest number we have seen. But it is a share of those who answered the survey that season, and people who have been through an avalanche accident may be more inclined to answer.



Avalanche experiences per season, 2021 to 2025, as a share of participants that season.



Photo: Amund Vaagland

Does it change anything?

They do not ski less. But some ski less in avalanche terrain.

Those with avalanche experience were out more to begin with. The season before, those without any experience had a median of 18 days out. Those with experience had between 25 and 40. The more serious the experience, the more days. The same goes for days in avalanche terrain.

After an avalanche experience, the number of days out stays about the same. So does the number of days in avalanche terrain, with two exceptions. Compared with those without experience, those who saw another group get injured or killed spent fewer days in avalanche terrain the season after. So did those where someone in their own group was injured or killed. These groups are small, as few as 11 people, so the results must be read with great caution.

Those who have been caught themselves also tend to put more effort into evaluating avalanche conditions before a tour, and into discussing conditions with their partners along the way. But they put more effort into finding fun terrain and good snow too.



Photo: Amund Vaagland

Willingness to take risk

For most of you, willingness to accept avalanche risk is stable from one season to the next. That holds even after an avalanche experience.

The people we interviewed said the same. Their willingness to take risks had not changed. But when they started explaining, a lot had: who they went with, and under which conditions they would go.

The willingness stays. What they do with it changes.

You know the risk

The more of your touring that goes into avalanche terrain, the more likely you think it is that you will trigger an avalanche. And those who accept the most risk are not blind to it. Among those willing to accept high or very high avalanche risk, many rate it as likely that they will be caught, injured or even killed. Among those who only accept low or no avalanche risk, almost no one does. In other words, we know there is real risk in avalanche terrain.

So it is not that we do not know the risk. But knowing it is not the same as feeling it. A probability in a survey is just a number. It cannot convey snow as hard as concrete, or the fear of realising that the slope is moving, and that you are moving with it.

To understand what changes when risk becomes real, we have to talk to those who have lived it.

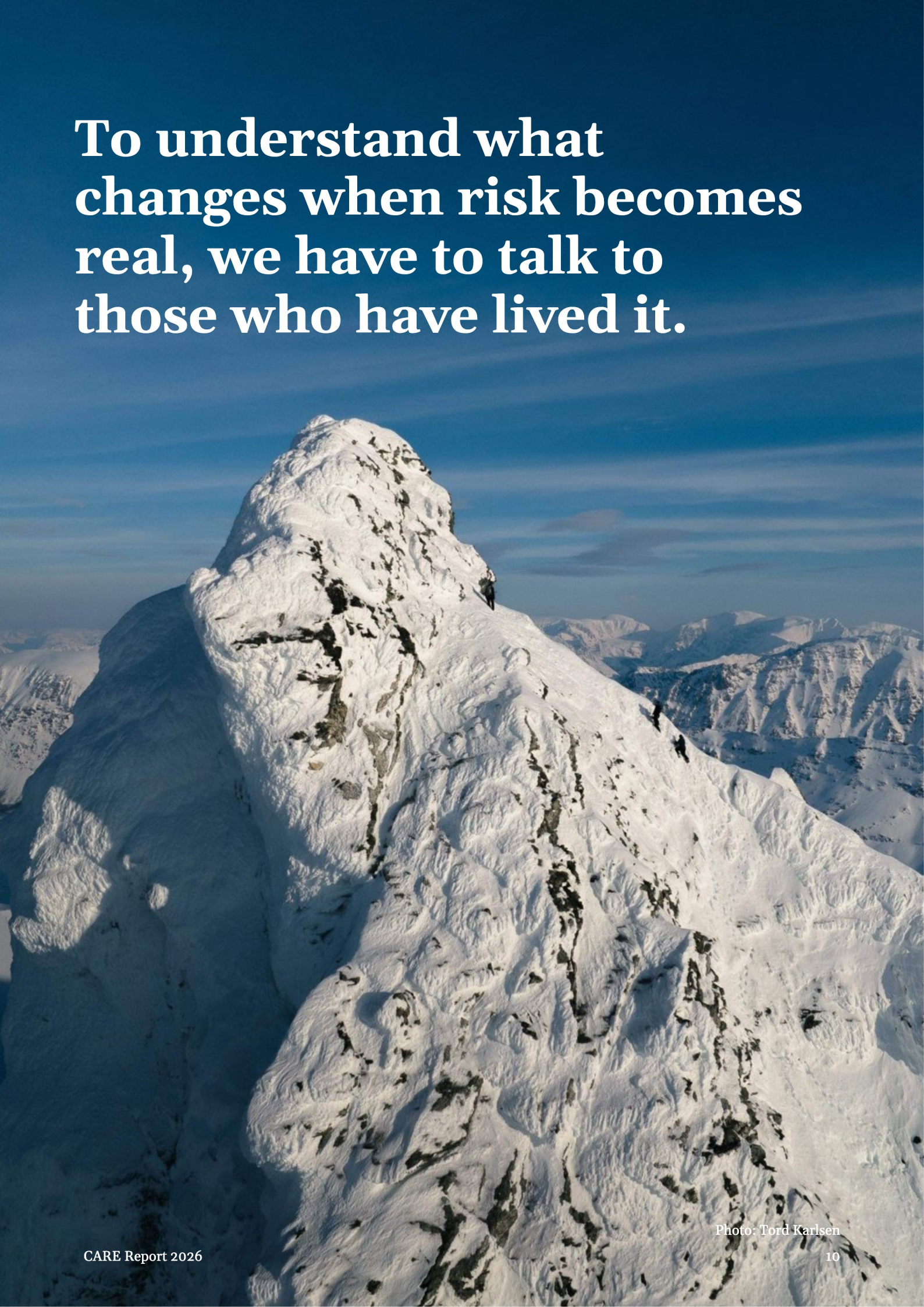


Photo: Tord Karlsen



Photo: Audun Hetland

Buried alive

What does being caught in a serious avalanche do to the way we make decisions in the mountains?

To find out, we sat down with almost 30 people who had been in serious avalanche accidents. Several had lost friends or been seriously injured themselves. A few could get up and walk away from the avalanche physically unharmed. But harm is not only physical.

Surviving a serious avalanche makes the risk real. For those who have never seen an avalanche up close, the risk is abstract. Our skiing, on the other hand, is completely real. We feel the joy of being on skis, the feeling of floating down the mountainside. The thrill when it is fast, steep or flowy. We feel it physically, in our bodies.

But the mountain is a poor teacher. Every tour tells us how well we skied, and that we made it down. It tells us almost nothing about how well we decided. We can misjudge the danger, ski a slope we should have left alone, and still have the best day of the season. Nothing happens, so it must have been fine.

You can try to imagine what it would be like to be caught in a big avalanche. How it feels to be washed down the mountain, or buried in snow as hard as concrete. We can think it. But only when you have lived it does the imagination become reality.

For those who have been caught in a big avalanche, imagination has become reality and the risk has become real.

That changes everything.

Most of those who return to skiing seek more knowledge and learning. They care a lot about who they go with, how they talk together and how the group works. They plan and gather more information beforehand, and out in the mountains they watch for changes in the snow and the weather. The threshold for throwing in the towel and turning around drops a lot. They often won't commit to a summit, but prefer a flexible plan.

This way of making decisions looks remarkably like what we see in avalanche experts with long experience.

But sometimes we learn the wrong things. Someone caught in the forest may later steer clear of the forest because it is risky, and choose more open terrain instead. Someone caught in open terrain steers clear of big mountainsides and chooses the forest because it feels safer.

The study: Hetland, A., Westerlund, T., Mannberg, A., & Pfuhl, G. (2026). Buried alive: A qualitative study of avalanche survivors' learning experience. Journal of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism, 54, 101021. doi.org/10.1016/j.jort.2026.101021

What you can learn

These are lessons you do not need to learn the hard way.

We are not saying an accident is a good way to learn. Quite the opposite. The point is to borrow the lessons from those who paid for them, before anything happens to you.

1 Plan for a change of mind

Those who came back spent more time planning. They gathered more information and thought harder about where and when to ski. And they stopped committing to a summit. It is easy to fall in love with a line. Once you have decided, turning around feels like giving something up.

Take it with you: Agree before you leave what would make you change the plan. Turning around is a result, not a failure.

2 Keep looking

Conditions change. The snow you meet is not always the snow you read about at home. Those who came back kept collecting information all day, and kept asking whether the plan still made sense.

Take it with you: Look for what could change your mind, not only for what confirms it.

3 Choose your partners

Skill and ambition are not enough. Can you say you are uncomfortable? Can you suggest turning around without ruining the day? Will the others listen? A group full of knowledge is no help if no one dares to speak.

Take it with you: Go with people you can disagree with.

4 Ask why, not only where

As we saw, the lesson people draw can stick to the exact terrain where it happened. Understandable. But the terrain is rarely the whole answer.

Take it with you: Ask why it happened. What did we decide, and what did we miss?

What did they learn?

Some came back wiser. Some learned lessons that did not help them. And some never came back at all.

When we hear about avalanche accidents, we usually learn little more than whether those involved survived. We rarely hear what it did to them, or what they learned. So we went back to the 28 interviews and looked at what each person actually took with them from the accident.

Looking back: what if, who and why?

Most of the people we talked to replayed the accident, again and again. What if we had turned at the ridge? What if I had gone first? How we answer those questions shapes what we learn.

Then there is where we place the blame. Was it us, our group, our choices? Or was it something out there, beyond our control? If it was out there, there is not much to change.

And finally, what we see as the root cause. Someone who blames the terrain learns about terrain. Someone who blames the group learns about people.

From this we found five types of learners. They are generalisations, and every individual experience of learning is valid. But the types sum up what many of the people we spoke to had in common.



Photo: Tord Karlsen

Five types of learners

TYPE 1

The Cautious Companion

They learned that the people matter as much as the snow. They became very aware of group dynamics, and of who they go where with.

The question: Who am I with, and can we talk?

TYPE 2

The Motivated Learner

The accident showed them how little they knew. They went looking for answers about how avalanches work and how terrain plays in.

The question: What do I actually know?

TYPE 3

The Multi-Level Learner

They see the bigger picture. Decisions on the mountain are shaped by everything else going on in life. There is always more behind an accident than the moment the slope released.

The question: What else am I bringing along today?

TYPE 4

The Little-to-no Learner

Often very experienced skiers who had made peace with the risk of steep terrain long before the accident. To them, the rewards outweigh the risks. They saw little reason to change.

The warning: Explaining an accident away is not the same as learning from it.

TYPE 5

The Dropout

They no longer go into avalanche terrain. Not even near it. After what they lived through, they simply cannot justify the risk.

The reality: For some, the price is the mountains themselves.

What people learned depended on how they made sense of what happened. And what one person learned is not necessarily the right lesson for the rest of us. But the first three types give us questions we can all ask before we go, without paying the price they paid.

The study: Røed, T., Hetland, A., Westerlund, T., Rolland, C.G., & Reinold, M. (2026). Learning from adversity: A typology of learners from avalanche accidents. doi.org/10.1080/14729679.2026.2740028

What an avalanche does to a life

A serious avalanche accident has ripple effects far beyond what happens on the mountain. After all the interviews we had done, we understood that we had to lift our gaze. So we contacted almost 30 new people from other accidents.

This time we asked: what does an avalanche accident do to a life?

Being certain that you are going to die puts life in perspective.

What really matters? How do I want to live my life? Who do I want to share it with? And who am I?

Great thinkers have said many wise things about the meaning of life, the experience of death and how we relate to the world. We brought their perspectives with us into the new interviews, and we divided the results in three.

> First the social: family, friends and network.
>
> Then what we do in life, the activities we pursue.
>
> And finally the existential: life, meaning and what matters.

The people around us

The people we talked to told us that surviving an avalanche showed them clearly who mattered in their lives. Those lying buried alive, in what could be their last moments, do not think about work and career. They think about children and family.

Back on the surface, many became focused on prioritising the meaningful relationships.

At the same time, many struggle with guilt. Guilt for surviving while friends died. Guilt for contributing to an accident where others lost a son, a daughter, a father or a mother. Shame when facing other skiers and institutions. These are heavy feelings to carry.

What we do

When we started this work, we thought many would give up skiing after a serious avalanche accident. Some did, of course. Still, the vast majority were determined to get back on skis. Out in the mountains was where they found meaning and community. That was where they cleared their heads and recovered. Even though the thing they held so dear had shown it could kill them, most fought their way back. For several, this confirmed how important skiing is to them.

For those who did not make it back to the mountains, the grief and emptiness became clear. Who am I now? What we spend a lot of time on tends to become part of us. Losing it often means losing a part of ourselves, a part that takes time to rebuild.

The existential

Learning that life has an end date makes the question of what matters urgent. For many, the avalanche accident became the start of a process of separating what matters from what does not. Some of those with a faith in God found it helpful to surrender their life and think: this is not up to me anymore. Even so, most were clear that it did not change their faith.

The study: Young, J.T., Hetland, A., & Reinold, M. Existential emergence: Exploring life after an avalanche accident. Unpublished manuscript.



Photo: Tarjei Skille

For many of us who have not been through a serious accident, it is easy to think that what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. That you will grow and get a better life after an accident like this. That is not true for most.

For many, an avalanche accident turns something that felt safe and good one moment into something dangerous and threatening the next. Many told us they are left with an existential anxiety. An undertone that reminds them that life could be over tomorrow. That things do not always turn out fine. That kind of anxiety can be hard to carry. What if my children are hit by a car on their way to school? Once you have lived through a catastrophe, it is a physical experience. The protective and often naive feeling that it won't happen to me is gone.

So when we stand there at the top, it can be useful to think: it can actually happen to me too.

BEFORE YOU HEAD OUT, ASK

Who am I going with?

Can we speak openly if someone has doubts?

Does our plan let us change our minds?

And what is really at stake if it goes wrong?

One last thing

Many of the people we talked to carry experiences that the rest of us cannot imagine. For several, one of the hardest parts was how others talked about their accident. We all have to remember that we were not there. In hindsight, everything tends to look clear.

We are deeply grateful to everyone who shared their stories with us, and to all of you who answer the CARE panel every season. Thank you very much!

We hope you get to experience everything that makes backcountry skiing so special this season: beautiful days, good snow, great people, and the feeling of being exactly where you want to be.

Take care of yourselves and each other.

CARE

Centre for Avalanche Research and Education
UiT The Arctic University of Norway

www.uit.no/research/care
audun.hetland@uit.no · andrea.mannberg@uit.no

