Heading beyond the gates: who is most at risk of getting involved in avalanche incidents out-of-bounds?
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In the last decade, out-of-bounds (OB) skiing has experienced a dramatic rise in popularity. Increasing numbers of traditional resort skiers venture beyond the resort boundaries searching for untracked powder and challenging terrain. However, this new found freedom comes at a considerable cost: In the last five winters, OB skiing was responsible for every fifth avalanche fatality in North America and Europe. Due to their interest in advanced terrain and the short window of opportunity for communicating relevant safety information, OB skiers pose a particularly challenging target audience for avalanche safety messages.

While media tends to stereotype OB skiers as extreme risk takers, the group is much more diverse. One of the key questions is therefore ‘Who is most at risk of involvement in an avalanche incident?’ As field campaigns are impractical for reliably monitoring OB skiers due to the dispersed nature of the sport and the temporal variability of the hazard conditions, we used a detailed online survey to understand the consideration given to avalanche hazard by OB skiers. An innovative multidimensional approach, integrating the two central dimensions of avalanche risk management (terrain choices and risk mitigation practices) was used to assign a risk level to survey participants. Subsequently, high-risk and low-risk groups are compared with respect to motivations and attitudes, risk perception, sensations seeking, self-efficacy, and understanding of ski area OB policies. The results of this study offer useful insights for the development of avalanche awareness messages specifically targeted at OB skiers and snowboarders most at risk.