

# The Guardian



## Queensland police spark anger with 'open mind' comment on murder of Hannah Clarke and children

**Domestic violence campaigners appalled force wants to consider suggestions Rowan Baxter was 'driven too far' when he set fire to his family in their car in Brisbane**

**LATEST: Queensland police detective stood aside over 'open mind' comments**

**Michael McGowan and Ben Smee**

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Queensland police have revealed that a man who killed his wife and three children by dousing them with petrol and setting them alight had a history of domestic violence and was known to them.

But in comments that have shocked domestic violence campaigners, the force says they are keeping an “open mind” about suggestions the 42-year-old Rowan Baxter had been “driven too far” and are appealing to people who knew the couple to come forward to understand his motives.

Hannah Clarke, 31, died at the Royal Brisbane and Women’s hospital on Wednesday night, less than 24 hours after Baxter poured petrol on his family in a domestic violence incident.

The children - Laianah, four, Aaliyah, six, and Trey, three - died in the car after it burst into flames on a quiet suburban street in leafy Camp Hill, in Brisbane’s east, on Wednesday

morning during their regular school run.

The estranged couple had separated before Christmas last year, and members of both families have painted a picture of a violent and controlling relationship.

Clarke's sister-in-law, Stacey Roberts, said her parents had "exhausted themselves" helping her "escape this monster", and in messages obtained by the Courier-Mail, a family member of Rowan Baxter repeatedly reassured Clarke she'd done the right thing in leaving.

"I'm so glad I got out when I did," Clarke wrote to the woman earlier this month.

"I'm OK, struggling, but I know I've made the right decision.

"I'm safe, I'm with my parents who are very, very normal. I'm just so glad I got out when I did. And I'm so glad you reached out to me."

On Thursday, Det Insp Mark Thompson confirmed domestic and family violence orders had been granted against Baxter, saying there had been "a number of engagements of police" between the couple.

"I can confirm Queensland police have engaged with both Hannah and her estranged husband in relation to domestic violence issues," he said.

"We have also engaged with both of the parties in referring them to support services.

"When it comes to Hannah we have dealt with her on a number of occasions and worked with the Brisbane Domestic Violence Centre in supporting Hannah throughout her family issues. And we've also referred Rowan Baxter to support services as well."

But in comments that drew an immediate and angry response from domestic violence advocates, Thompson also said police would keep an "open mind" about Baxter's motives and wanted to speak to people who knew both families.

"We need to look at every piece of information and to put it bluntly there are probably people out there in the community that are deciding which side, so to speak, to take in this investigation," he said.

"Is this an issue of a woman suffering significant domestic violence and her and her children perishing at the hands of the husband, or is it an instance of a husband being driven too far by issues he's suffered by certain circumstances into committing acts of this form?"

Renee Eaves, a victims' advocate who has worked extensively with domestic abuse sufferers in their interactions with the Queensland police, said she could not believe the comments.

"This ... is nothing short of a flashing billboard about the mindset by some police around domestic violence," she said.

"This narrative is the most dangerous thing that exists for victims who doubt themselves after an attack that maybe they were partly responsible. Police seem to think women make up complaints or are complicit, and as a result they fail to protect them.

"If police are now implying that a murdered woman might be at fault, then that to me raises critical questions about whether they took the threat to her safety seriously enough.

“A calculated monster has killed a woman and her children in the most abhorrent way anyone could imagine. Even when the worst has occurred, they’re still questioning the woman, and still looking for reasons to justify this man’s behaviour.”

Angela Lynch, the chief executive of the Women’s Legal Service Queensland, said: “for police to be buying into that kind of rhetoric is very concerning.”

“It’s giving legitimacy to what has occurred. It’s victim blaming. It’s saying that she might have caused this through her own actions. It plays into very dangerous ideas in the community around victim blaming and a whole range of myths about the family law system.”

Lynch said police often say domestic violence cases as “tit for tat between two parties, rather than an abusive pattern of violence”.

The Courier Mail reported on Thursday that Baxter had kidnapped one of the three children and fled interstate months earlier. Thompson said police were “aware of the movement of the children over the last couple of months” but were not investigating a kidnapping.

“The dynamics of a family that are broken and estranged are particularly poignant to this investigation I guess,” he said.

“And [it is] very hard to decipher without us being able to put some sort of clarification around what’s happened. Unfortunately, some of the people that were involved in that are no longer with us and we’re unable to speak to them. Once again, the community need to come to us and tell us what they know.”

*. If you or someone you know is impacted by sexual assault, domestic or family violence, call 1800RESPECT on 1800 737 732 or visit [1800RESPECT.org.au](https://www.1800respect.org.au)*

*. Crisis support services can be reached 24 hours a day: Lifeline 13 11 14; Suicide Call Back Service 1300 659 467; Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800; MensLine Australia 1300 78 99 78; Beyond Blue 1300 22 4636*

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