

BLAMING THE VICTIM

By Concetta Benn

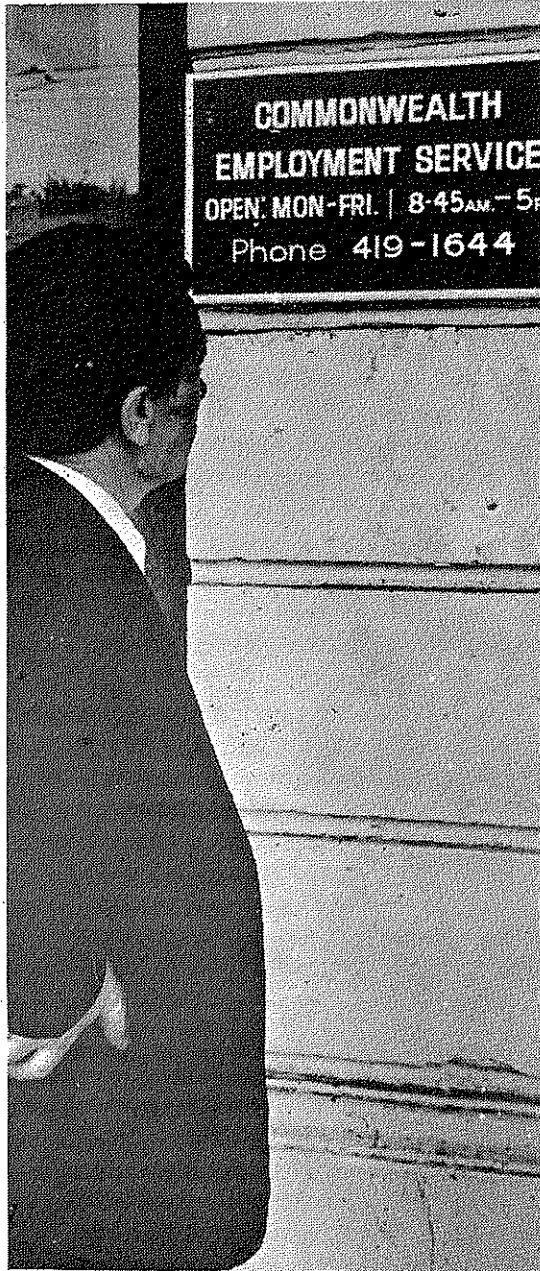
Ocka Smith and his family are poor. They've always been poor and unless something changes drastically, it looks as if they'll stay that way. Ocka is an unskilled labourer and earns a dollar more than the minimum wage (\$52.00). The four kids are all small and his wife stays home and cares for them.

Mind you, the Government helps them with \$5.75 per week Child Endowment. That isn't enough to pay for one pair of poor quality shoes which will wear out in a month anyway. So the Child Endowment doesn't even keep the kids in shoes. When the wife was sick after having one of the kids they got into arrears with the rent and were evicted from their Housing Commission home. Now they live in a private house at a rent of \$23 per week. With \$29 per week for food, clothing, transport, chemist bills and the television, they hardly ever manage without begging or borrowing.

Every month as unemployment increases, Ocka gets more and more worried; if he loses his job the family is finished. He becomes irritable and hard to live with; he feels guilty every time he looks at his family; he goes to the pub too often. Ocka and his wife will stay in this position until his wife is forced to go to work and leave the children or 'the kids are off their hands'.

These are the families that most of society looks at and blames for their poverty stricken state. I am tired of being asked by audiences of well-meaning Christian people the following question: 'Don't you think it's his own fault that he hasn't got on in the world?' My answer for the public record is: 'No, I don't think it's his fault. I think it is my fault and your fault for allowing society to treat families in this way.'

There is no way in which Ocka could have helped himself. He left school at 14 years to help his Mum who was a widow. He married at 19



years because his girl got pregnant (they couldn't afford contraception or an abortion even if they knew about them). Since they got married Ocka has been in full employment but they always wear second-hand clothes and they're always in debt. For that matter the

only new piece of furniture they've ever had is the television set, and they're paying through the nose for that on Hire Purchase.

For many years the Brotherhood tried to help Ocka and his family by giving them second-hand furniture and clothing, by sending the kids for holidays, by occasionally supplementing their weekly income. Ocka's wife is well-known to us. Ocka we never see: he's too ashamed to come begging for charity. Although the help was well-motivated and given without prejudice we have been missing the real point.

Ocka's trouble is he needs more money. He also needs a lot of other things including cheaper housing, better education for his kids and health services which reach his family.

The Brotherhood's new program for families, which is due to commence later in the year, will be based on helping Ocka and his family achieve these things for themselves. If the Government won't help Ocka become more skilled so he can get a better job, then perhaps we can provide retraining. If local schools and health services are bad then Ocka and his wife can learn from us how to democratically demand better education and health facilities. If the Minister of Social Welfare keeps on blaming Ocka because his kids are delinquent we can help Ocka collect the information which will show the Minister that it is not Ocka's fault but the result of poor provisions for youth and society's materialistic attitude.



The possibilities are limitless. But first of all Ocka, using us as his resources, must identify his own needs. We intend to provide the opportunities for him and his family to do so. Despite all our years of work with poor families I don't think we always know what is important to them. They must tell us. However, I suspect they want what we all want — peace, security and equality.

So it's time we stopped blaming Ocka for being poor and started blaming the system!

'Blaming the Victim' is the name of an excellent book on the same subject by William Ryan, published by Random House, New York, 1970.

