Sugar prices boost cost of November food bill

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Soaring sugar prices, already the target of government probes and consumer boycotts, boosted the price of the family grocery bill during November, an Associated Press marketbasket survey shows.

Shoppers who avoided buying sugar, however, found sales on meat and eggs helped stretch the budget at the supermarket.

The AP drew up a random list of 15 commonly purchased food and nonfood items, checked the prices on March 1, 1973 at a supermarket in each of 13 cities and has rechecked at the beginning of each succeeding month.

The latest survey showed the bill was up during November in every city except Dallas, where sugar was unavailable and therefore did not boost the total as it did elsewhere.

The average November increase in the 12 cities where the bill went up was 6 per cent. If sugar was removed from the total, however, the rise was only seven-tenths of one per cent. Not counting sugar, the bill declined in six of the 12 cities and stayed the same in one.

During October, the AP marketbasket bill was up in seven cities, down in four and unchanged in two.

A comparison of current prices with those at the beginning of the year showed the marketbasket bill up in every city, with an average increase of 20 per cent. Again, much of the increase was due to disproportionately large boosts in the cost of sugar, which more than tripled in some areas as worldwide demand shot up.

Government authorities have predicted that food prices overall will rise about 15 or 16 per cent this year. The Council on Wage and Price Stability held hearings in Washington, D.C., last week to investigate sugar prices and a house subcommittee plans another probe this week.

Farmers, refiners and retailers repeatedly have denied that they are taking advantage of consumers by charging high prices for sugar. Farmers concede they're getting more money — raw sugar is selling for about 60 cents a pound, about five times what it was a year ago—but they argue that their costs for things like farm fuel and fertilizer have risen sharply. They also contend that they need the profits on sugar to make up for losses on other farm items like cattle.

Some consumers have solved the problem by simply eliminating sugar from their diets.

There were scattered sales, generally reflecting lower prices paid to farmers in recent months. The price of a pound of chopped chuck, for example, was down in six cities, unchanged in four and up in only three. Eggs went down in four cities, were unchanged in three and went up in six.

The day of the week on which the check was made varied depending on the month. Standard brands and sizes were used when available. If the requested size and brand was not available on March 1, 1973, a comparable substitute was selected.

The latest government marketbasket showed that during October, the cost of a month's supply of groceries rose $4 to another record high.

The items on the AP checklist were: chopped chuck, center cut pork chops, frozen orange juice concentrate, coffee, paper towels, butter, Grade-A medium white eggs, creamy peanut butter, laundry detergent, fabric softener, chocolate chip cookies, milk, all-beef frankfurters and granulated sugar.